ORAL TRADITION AND EARLY HISTORY OF EFON ALAAYE, SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is an outline history of Efon Alaaye, Southwest Nigeria. The origin and early history of Efon, like those of most Yoruba towns, due to the eauity of written accounts is frosty. However, much evidence point to a certain group, the Isinkin under their leader called Oisikin, as the earliest settler, but later dislodged by another group, the Obalu led by Ekuwi Oloba. Efon Alaaye kingdom was eventually established after the Aaye group from Ile-Ife had supplanted the Obalu. The prime purpose of this essay is to shed more light upon the pre-colonial history of Efon Alaaye. The work seeks to conduct an incisive inquiry into the origin, establishment and early political history of the town. The study adopts the descriptive and analytical method of historical discourse as the framework of analysis.

Keywords: Efon Alaaye, oral tradition, early history, Isinkin, Obalu, Aaye

Introduction

Efon Alaaye, the headquarters of Efon Local Government Council, Ekiti State is about sixty kilometers North of Akure, the Ondo State capital and about two hundred and eighty-six kilometers North East of Lagos, erstwhile capital city of Nigeria. Efon situates in a valley and spreads over an area of about 136 squares. It is bounded round by chains of ridges rising to an average height of about 2000 feet above sea-level. According to the 1992 census in Nigeria, Efon population was 143,000. Efon Alaaye falls within the humid tropical zone characterized by the wet and dry climate. It enjoys relatively heavy rainfall annually. The onset and retreat of rainfall occur in March and October respectively and these are characterized by thunder storms. The rainy season lasts for about seven to eight months. Efon is drained by many streams and rivers from the surrounding hills. They are dependable even in dry season because they never dry up completely. Two of such rivers are historically significant for they are believed to be of medicinal value which the people consider as divine blessings bestowed on
them. River Olua is believed to be capable of healing victims of guinea-worm, while river Oni is also believed to possess elements of divine healing to the sick and capable of washing off misfortune in anybody who bathes in it after the late Apostle J.A. Babalola of Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C) fame had blessed it. These two ‘miraculous’ rivers attract people from diverse areas of Yoruba land to Efon Alaaye.

The hilly nature of Efon had produced the effect of making its people to be independent and warlike in nature. This peculiar hilly environment had made the Alaaye, the Oba, to be reputedly known in Yoruba land for his eagerness to dare his neighbours for wars, hence the popular saying Oke lo ma’laaye tile Ogun loke Efon literally translated to mean, the hills goaded the spirit of Efon natural ruler to yearn for wars.

Efon Alaaye is the gateway to Ekiti from Ilesa and its affinity with Ekiti is more on the geographical location than its cultural traits. In fact, it shares more of the Ijesa’s culture than the Ekiti’s. Efon dialect is clearly related to that of Ijesa. The similarity is so striking to the extent that most Yoruba ethnic groups oftentimes mistake an Efon man for Ijesa.

It is not known when exactly Efon Alaaye was founded. It can however boast of about sixty-five past Obas. This is known because Chief Osisinkin has a string of cowries in his custody. Each cowry is said to represent an Oba. According to oral sources, the incumbent Alaaye, Oba Emmanuel Adesanya Aladejare is the 67th Alaaye in Efon although forty-six names of Efon past Obas are recorded. If this figure is anything to go by, it follows that Efon Alaaye must have been founded a long time ago and it is probably one of the oldest Yoruba towns.

The history of Efon is shrouded in myths and legends; its origin is both obscure and uncertain. Up till now, only scanty and incomprehensive research has been done on its history. In most of the existing literature, information is grossly inadequate and oftentimes distorted. This has reduced to an insignificant level the role played by the Efon in the socio-political and economic development of Yorubaland. In this essay, the origin and development of Efon-Alaaye are examined with a view to seeing the evolution of the Alaaye kingdom and its socio-political development from the earliest times to the dawn of British colonial rule.

Traditions Of Origin.

The origin of Efon like those of most Yoruba towns without written accounts is clothed in myths and legends. From available resources, it is generally agreed that the ISINKIN group under their leader called OISINKIN, were the earliest settlers of the town. They were met and overpowered by the OBALU group led by EKUWI OLOBA. For several years EKUWI OLOBA reigned supreme until another more powerful group, the AAYE led by
ALAAYE from Ile-Ife either by force of arms or diplomacy imposed itself on them. In the ensuing contest for ultimate leadership Ekuwi lost the premier position to the Alaaye, after which Ekuwi Oloba agreed to change his name to ABA OLOJA (father of the town) now known as OBALOJA. No one is sure when the Aaye group migrated to Efon. What is however clear is that the group migrated from Ile-Ife to Efon to establish the Alaaye kingdom. There exist two irreconcilable accounts of how the kingdom was established. The first account maintained what OBALUFON ALAYEMORE the grand son of OLOFIN ODUDUWA was the first Alaaye of Efon. He was said to have become the first Oba in Ile-Ife after the death of his father. His father according to our source was OBALUFON OGBOGBODINRIN. Alayemore was said to have ascended the thrown when Oranyan was sojourning at Oyo-Ile. On Oranyan’s return to Ile-Ife, Alayemore fled the city to his maternal home at OBA (probably in the Akure District) from where he migrated to an unnamed settlement where he met ORINKINLUA and her husband OISINKIN. He subsequently became the first Alaaye of Efon.

Later, emissaries of the Ife kingmakers sent for him to return to Ile-Ife to re-ascend the throne of his fathers after Oranyan’s death. The people of Efon Alaaye were said to have refused to let him go. But with the tact and diplomacy of the Ife royal messengers, Alayemore was allowed to go with them on the condition that the only son he had by an Efon woman be left behind to continue to rule. Alayemore was said to have consented. He crowned his young son as the new Oba. He decorated him with all the insignia of an Oba. The young Oba was put under the guardianship of the Oisinkin. Since then, the source continued, it has become the traditional duty of the Oisinkin to present any body chosen as the Alaaye to the people of Efon on the day of installation. It was from the sons of Alayemore that the present three rulling houses in Efon evolved. The words EFON and ALAAYE were said to have been coined from OBALUFON ALAYEMORE.

An Ile-Ife source however corroborated parts of the above account. The source recalled Obalufon Alayemore being an Oba in Ile-Ife, though not the first, but the third after Obalufon OgboGBodinrin, his father. The source also recalled that Oranyan, younger brother to Obalufon OgboGBodinrin came back to Ife at a time to usurp the throne from Alayemore. But the source referred to Oba near Akure and not Efon, as Alayemore’s place of asylum after his flight from Ile-Ife. Moreso, there was no reference in the account to Alayemore coming back to Ile after the death of Oranyan.

However, from the two variants, certain confusions and inconsistencies can easily be noticed. The first variant claimed that Alayemore was the grandson of Olofin Oduduwa and that he was the first Oba in Ile-Ife. This contradicts the Ife tradition which acclaimed Olofin
Oduduwa as the first ruler and Alayemore as the third monarch in Ile-Ife. Indeed, it is illogical to hold that a grandson ruled before his grandfather. Both variants referred to Obalufon Alayemore as a direct son of Olofin Oduduwa. This seems rather improbable because Alayemore was not mentioned by any popular Yoruba tradition as one of the direct sons of Oduduwa. This account is therefore unclear and misleading. Furthermore, to claim that Alayemore reigned in Ife when Oranyan was a sojourner at Oyo-Ile is rather difficult to comprehend. As Samuel Johnson put it, “it was Adimu Ola, the son of Oweni, who ruled in Ife after Oduduwa” 6. This assertion has not been invalidated by any other popular Yoruba tradition. The claim that Oranyan came back to Ile-Ife to rule is also misleading. According to Johnson, “after the death of Okanbi, Oranyan migrated to Oko where he reigned and died” 7. Oranyan could therefore not have reigned in Ife after he had settled and died at Oko.

As far as the Oisinkin is concerned, it is a fact that he is by tradition recognized as the only person saddled with the responsibility of presenting the Oba-elect to the people of Efon on the day of installation. But this is not enough to give credibility to the story. In the first place, the story was related by a young literate person from the Oisinkin lineage group in Aaye quarters who had knowledge of the local history of Ife as from 1980 upwards. Therefore the probability of his personal or clan interest colouring his account cannot be ruled out 8. This shows an abuse of oral tradition inspite of its obvious advantages. Moreover, apart from the fact that the name Obalufon Alayemore is conspicuously absent from the compiled list of Efon past Obas by chief Oisinkin of Isinkin the royal Archivist, this tradition is very unpopular in Efon 9. Elders from the Oisinkin family denied any knowledge of such tradition. The installation story as it relates to the Oisinkin probably has an element of truth but does not represent the true story of the origin of the kingdom. The truth probably lies elsewhere.

Concerning the derivation of the name Efon-Alaaye., our informant may have coined the name, Efon Alaaye from Obalufon Alayemore. He may have skillfully but erroneously coined Efon from Obalufon which sounds like Oba Ilu Efon (the king of Efon) and Alaaye from Alayemore. This is an intelligent guess work. It may be dangerous to subscribe to this version as Efon had been known and recognized before the arrival of the Aaye group and the so-called Obalufon Alayemore. According to chief Oisinkin of Isinkin, Efon Alaaye, the term EFON was given to the present site because ELEFON now worshipped as EMILA of Efon was the name of the local god worshipped by the people of his quarters because he was the first settler. These claims may not be far from truth but it is not very popular in Efon Alaaye.
However, another account claimed that Alaaye was originally the Aremo to Olofin Ogogbonomudu. He was born an handsome prince and concealed from the Olofin when he was born. The time of his birth coincided with the period when every male boy born on the throne was being killed for undisclosed reasons. This particular prince was spared from the mass massacre because he was considered too handsome (emure) to die by the priests/executioners. To save the prince from the royal executioners, the source continued, all the blacksmiths in Ile-Ife were ordered by their leader to produce a long iron chain. This done, the priests tied the prince with the chain and wrapped him up with a large sheet of white cloth. The priests subsequently went to report to the Olofin that a ‘strange’ baby bound in chain had dropped from Heaven (sky) on the bank of river MOKURO in Ife. The Olofin personally visited the scene and on sighting the little kid, he was said to have exclaimed in wonderment: Omo ewon bale rowojo Okirikisi omo toju orun oaye. This means, the strange baby in chains, the baby that descended from heaven in chains. Hence, the general belief in Efon today that nobody fathered or mothered the Alaaye and that he dropped from the sky in chain. The Alaaye is feared because of his ‘unique’ birth.

Meanwhile, the Olofin was said to have personally lifted the boy, put him on his thigh with an order to spare the ‘strange gift’ from Olodumare (God). This was said to be the origin of the ‘lapping episode’ between the Olofin (now Ooni) and the Alaaye. The Ooni unaware of what really happened adopted the boy as his own. The boy grew up in the palace as a darling prince to the Olofin. One day the boy attempted wearing one of the crowns of his father. The Olofin rebuked him for this. The ‘spoil’t princess took annoyance and wept uncontrollably. He was consoled by the Olofin but not before he had been promised to be made an Oba of Iraye quarters in Ile-Ife where he would have unrestrained access to his own crown. When he became of age, the Olofin made good his promise. He decorated him with all the paraphernalia of a king and installed him as the Oba Alaaye, ruler of Iraye, Ile-Ife. Being a favourite of the Olofin, he was given a big sacred drum, one of the three biggest royal drums in the palace called IYANGED. Olofin retained the ESIGISI drum for his personal use and the third one called GBEDU for the Alaafin of Oyo.

The story of how and why the Alaaye of Iraye left Ile-Ife for Efou is unclear and confusing. One tradition revealed that the people of Iraye complained bitterly to the Olofin that they could no longer serve two masters in the same town. Apparently irritated by the stance taken by his subjects, the prince who had taken the Alaaye title abdicated the throne with his sympathizers and migrated to Efou. If this account were true, it seems that the young ruler may have been very arrogant, high-handed and autocratic. His misrule may have alienated him from his subjects.
However, Chief Olufidipe Johnson, the late Obalaaye of Iraye quarters in Ile-Ife claimed that the Alaaye left Ile-Ife because of a chiefaincy row between him and his senior brother Obalaaye. Obalaaye with more supporters subsequently supplanted his brother to become the new ruler of Iraye. According to late Pa Olufidipe, the estranged Oba Alaaye, with his aggrieved party, left Ile-Ife in anger with a vow never to look back until he had found his own independent kingdom. When he left Ile-Ife, he reached Ipole near Ilesa before the night fell. He settled there for a while before he continued his journey until he finally reached UGOBOLE AAYE a location of about five kilometers north East of Efon, where he settled. He became the first Alaaye of Aaye people. His original name was IJI-EMIGUN.

Another variant of the same tradition as recorded by R.A Vosper said that after many years, one Alaaye died leaving behind two ambitious sons crying for the coveted throne. The elder brother came to the Olofin to press his claims, but before his arrival at Iraye, the other prince had run with the crown to Ugbole Aaye in the Ekiti country as Alaaye and called his new abode Efón, instead of Iraye. The elder brother wept bitterly and reported again to the Olofin who sent messengers in hot pursuit of the Alaaye, traced his settlement and took back the crown which was given to the elder brother to wear as the Oba of the remaining people of Iraye. This suggests that the Alaaye is not a recognized crowned head or his crown is not a genuine one. This is not true as the Alaaye is widely recognized as one of the foremost crowned heads in Yorubaland. In fact, when Ekitiparapo Council of Obas, pe olu pe olu (Pelupelu), was instituted at Oke-Imo, Ilesa in 1900, the Alaaye took the sixth position and the fourth in Ekiti, whereas, Obalaye is not a recognized crowned head but chief in Ile-Ife.

Looking at the above traditions critically certain issues need be clarified. First, the reference to the killings of princes in Ile-Ife raises a fundamental question – why? If it was true that all the princes in Ile-Ife were being put to death there must be some reasons. Then to spare the life of one child just because of his handsome looks is doubtful. Taken that the mass massacre episode is indeed true, here there must have been certain reason(s) behind it. Perhaps, there were many ambitious princes and their continuous presence in the palace was considered inimical to order and stability of the kingdom. Another safe deduction might be that the execution was meant to atone for the wrongs done to the gods because human sacrifice was common in those days; or for appeasement to the numerous deities to grant peace and tranquility to the people of Ife; or to repulse an impending epidemic in Ile-Ife. Considering all the probabilities, then to spare the life of one prince while the rest were being killed would have imperiled the purpose for which the ritual was designed to serve. This claim is therefore untenable. Moreover, the reference to a fragile little baby tied to a heavy, long iron chain to
deceive the Olofin is difficult to comprehend. The saying credited to the Olofin saying *Okirikisi Omo toju orun oaye* should not be taken as something beyond the ordinary. This is probably an attempt to build an awe around the personality of the Alaaye. Normally, every king in Yorubaland has different awe – inspiring but similar attributes and he is feared, loved and revered by his subjects. That awe and aura surrounding the office of the Oba perhaps explains this attribute. Moreover, every Oba in Yorubaland is believed to be above ordinary mortals.

Nonetheless, the assertion that the Olofin often laps the Alaaye should not be glossed over. In the words of E.H. Car…” history is an unending dialogue between the past and the present”\textsuperscript{15}. Taking this statement seriously, this claim has a past which bears a link with the present because, up till today, whenever an Alaaye hosts the Olofin (now Ooni) the latter usually sits the former on his lap. Similarly, whenever the Olofin plays host to the Alaaye, the Alaaye does not observe the usual protocol like the other Yoruba Obas in the Olofin’s palace. He moves about freely as he wishes. This appears to be a re-enactment of the past when the Alaaye was born and treated as a favourite child of the Olofin. And as for the Ivangede drum, presented to the Alaaye by the Ooni, this royal sacred drum is still intact in Efon Alaaye till today and it is beaten only on important occasions such as the demise of an Alaaye or when a new one is being installed. It is also beaten during the period of national emergencies such as declaration of war or when an Alaaye is being de-stoole\textsuperscript{16}.

However, the story of how and why the Alaaye came to set up his kingdom at Efon has three variants all of which have certain elements in common. These include the chieftaincy now between the two brothers; the migrations of the Alaaye to Ugbole Aaye in the Efon country where he settled and the Iraye quarters in Ile-Ife. Besides, the tradition is very popular and it enjoys wide acceptability in both Efon and Ile-Ife. Although it is not clear when the Alaaye left Ile-Ife to establish his kingdom, what emerges from these traditions is that the Alaaye was an Ile-Ife prince of Oduduwa descent who migrated to Ugbole-

Aaye before he and his followers finally settled in Efon where either by diplomatic tactic or superior military force he imposed himself on the aboriginals, the Isinkin and Obalu, to establish the new Alaaye kingdom.

In the course of years after the Alaaye had consolidated his power over the Obalu and the Aaye (his own group), four other independent villages emerged to settle in the neighbourhood of the new kingdom. This suggests that the Alaaye must have been recognized as a powerful leader who could guarantee their protection and safety. The four villages included the *EJINGAN* led by OISAJINGAN ABALASI, the *USAJA* led by PETEEKO, the *EMO*, led by ALAAYE ALUGOKE and the *UKAGBE* led
by OJUBU. It is not known when exactly the villages agreed to fuse with Efon. What is clear, however, is that the six hitherto autonomous villages closed ranks to become what is today known as Efon Alaaye. Oba Alaaye of Aaye quarters was recognized as the paramount ruler of the united kingdom\(^{17}\).

Efon Alaaye kingdom was said to have had twelve other sub-towns and nine of these were taken to Ilesa by Oba OGEGE-EPO, the Alaaye who was exiled in Ugbo-Erinmo (Erinmo forest) and later on became the Owa-Obokun of Ilesa. Most Ijesas in Ilesa when interviewed on Oba Ogege-Epo refused to talk about the circumstances surrounding a stranger element from Efon-Alaaye becoming their Oba. Perhaps they felt embarrassed that the Efon, their erstwhile rival and ‘enemy’, might claim that Ilesa was at one point in history a colony of Efon, considering the fact that the two communities went to war at different times against each another in those days. Nonetheless, there has been no official denial by the Ilesa people that Oba Ogege-Epo (probably known by another name in Ilesa) ruled in Ilesa.

**Conclusion**

From what we have highlighted so far, it is quite clear that Efon Alaaye is one of the oldest Yoruba kingdoms which trace their origin to Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba civilization. Like most Yoruba communities, the town was not spared in the internecine Yoruba wars of the nineteenth century out of which it emerged a battered but united, strong, indivisible political entity. Its political system was similar to what operated in other Yoruba communities. The system was democratic as it embraced all democratic principles – advice, council and consultation – working up towards the king who was the “executive summit” of what should be called a “legislative pyramid”. The kingdom as it were enjoyed absolute independence prior to British colonial rule.

**References:**

See the Provisional Census figure, Ondo State, 1991 Census figure in 1963 was put at 67,000. Courtesy Census, Western Nigeria, University of Ibadan, Library.


Evidence of Pa Reuben Folayan, aged 70+ (Deceased) 6/10/92 at his Ojebalu Residence, Efon Alaaye. He was the chief spokesman for the Oisinkin