

PRE-COLONIAL POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA: A STUDY OF THE IGALA POLITICAL KINGDOM

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Abstract

Available evidence has shown that pre-colonial African societies had a formal and organized system of government before the advent of colonialism. However, there seem to be an intellectual conspiracy against the minor ethnic groups as most of the contemporary literature has focused on the three major ethnic groups-Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and the Igbo political systems. In order to save these minor ethnic groups from political extinction, this paper attempt a discourse on the pre-colonial political administration of the North Central Nigeria ; a study of the Igala political kingdom. The study relied on secondary data to generate data for this study. The paper is structured into different but interrelated compartment. The paper found out that in about the second decade of the 17th century, the process of the evolution of dynastic rule which started in the 16th Century had become consolidated under Ayegba Om'Idoko and as such this marked our starting point. The paper concludes that Igala political kingdom was the only most powerful kingdom between the 16th -18th century after defeating the Jukuns, Binis and Hausa /Fulani jihadists. In the light of this, the Igala political kingdom cannot be left in the oblivion but must be acknowledged and documented for political history and posterity.

Keywords: Attah, Igala, Igala political kingdom, Attah Igala, and Pre-colonial political administration

Introduction

Abundant literature exists to discredit the erroneous claim by some European scholars about the non-existence of a formal and organized system of government in Africa and Nigeria before the advent of colonialism in Africa. However, there tend to be a lopsided documentation even from among the indigenous scholars of the pre-colonial political administration in Nigeria in favour of the three major ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and

Yoruba political pre-colonial system) out of the over 300 ethnic groups that constitute the country. There seem to be an intellectual conspiracy against the minority ethnic groups including Igala kingdom because as Abdullahi(2006) had observed, of the three major ethnic groups identified in Nigeria by a slogan WAZOBIA, the WA in it means come in both Yoruba and Igala yet; little has been documented on the pre-colonial political administration of the Igala kingdom. This paper as a point of departure attempts to explore the pre-colonial political administration in one of the so-called minor ethnic groups located in the North Central geo-political zone of Nigeria's political landscape, the Igala Kingdom. The justification for the Igala Kingdom is predicated on the fact that even though available literature have acknowledged the existence of pre-colonial administration in Nigeria before the advent of colonialism, efforts have been on the major ethnic groups as if the minor groups had no formal system of government before the advent of colonialism. Isiaq(2008) for instance had observed that ever before the commencement of colonialism, the people of what later became known as Nigeria were living under different administration and political arrangement. He however noted that he will "take a penetrating analysis of the following notable pre-colonial systems in Nigeria". The notables he noted are the Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani and Igbo pre-colonial political system. There is therefore a tendency as Coleman(1986) noted for the smaller and more fragmented groups to lose their identity and gravitate toward the predominating groups, particularly the Hausa. But as a matter of fact, before the advent of the colonialism, Coleman(1986) had noted that about seven prominent black kingdoms were noticeable in the forest belt, thus, the Ashanti, Dahomey, Ife, Oyo, Bini, Igala and Jukun (Apa) Kingdoms. Hence, this paper attempts a discourse on the pre-colonial political system of the Igala kingdom.

The Igala Kingdom occupies a strategic place in the history of Nigeria; it is the 9th largest ethnic group out of the existing over 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is one of the few ethnic groups that share intimate affinity with the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Aside of that, Igala orthography (alphabetical writings and correct spellings of words) according to Ocheja (2011) is one of the only twenty seven or so orthography recognized by the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) of the Federal Ministry of Education as having got an acceptable orthography out of the over three hundred main languages that exist in Nigeria today.

Origin and Background of the Igala people

Igala is an ethnic group of Nigeria. The home of the Igala is situated East of the River Niger and Benue confluence. The origin of the Igala like

most other Nigerian tribes is shrouded in the sharp infested waters of legends and tradition attributing to different sources, hence, justifying the claim that there is no single account of the origin of people which is unassailable. The actual origin of the Igala people is not quite known as different people present many versions of legends of immigration. However, one may agree with Boston(1968) that different tradition correspond to different phases of history in which the Yoruba link may be the most ancient, followed by the Bini connection, and most recently, some form of Jukun suzerainty; others feel the Igala migrated from Mecca(Southern Yemen) or Mali. The tradition, which holds that the Igala has the same origin with the Yoruba seem to be a plausible one. This submission is because of the fact that the Igala language has a lot in common with the Yoruba and as Okwoli has observed, when people speak the same language, or related languages, there is every reason to believe that they have common origin or they have met somewhere. It is against this backdrop that a lot of historians according to Onucheyo(2006) have posited that the Igala and the Yoruba are cousins; one evidence of this is the linguistic similarity. In the former you find a town called Abejukolo Ife and in the later you find Ile Ife. But as the immediate Attah Igala, His Royal Highness, Alhaji Aliyu Obaje that just passed on cited in Ocheja(2011:6) has put it, “the Igala came from Southern Yemen, passed through Ethiopia(where there is an ethnic group called Gala) and through the Mali empire to Jukun land and finally to the present Igala land ; this took place in the medieval ages.

Igalaland is situated on the left side of the rivers of Niger and Benue. It now constitutes the eastern senatorial districts of Kogi state of Nigeria. It is bounded on the eastern side by Idoma land of Benue state, flanked by Anambra and Enugu state on the south and by the rivers Benue and Niger in the north and west respectively. The area is approximately between Latitude 6 and 30 and 8 40 North and Longitude 6 30 and 7 40 east and covers an area of about 13,665 square kilometers. It is the largest area occupied by one single ethnic group in Kogi state. According to Ijoma (2007:25):

The Igala people live on the left side or east bank of the Niger above the Igbo as far north at the confluence of Benue. Their geographical position in central Nigeria has naturally brought the Igala into contact with a variety of peoples of Nigeria namely, Edo, Yoruba, Kakanda, Bassa, Igbira, Gwari, Idoma, Tiv and Jukun. The area is something of a melting pot to which recent investigation have invited attention. Indeed, not only historians but archaeologists, anthropologists and arts experts have directed attention to the whole area around the Niger/Benue confluence as an area

that would provide some solution to the early Nigerian history.

In conclusion, Boston(1968) believes that the central geographical locations of the Igala people has exposed them to a wide variety of linguistic as well as cultural influences from other ethnic groups in the country. This is manifested in sharing of similar names and some other cultural affinity with other groups in Nigeria.

Establishment of the Igala Kingdom

Igala was a vassal state to the Jukun kingdom, where as a usual practice, at the beginning and end of each year, a fixed number of slaves, money and several material of value are sent to the Aku Uka of Wukari. Subsequently, a time came when Ayegba Om' Idoko, (Ayegba the son of Idoko) took the boldest step by refusing to give these valuables instead presented 9 calabashes popularly called (Ukpekpele in Igala) filled with animal dung. Aku Uka was enraged and promptly decided to punish Ayegba and the Igala people-his subjects. Ayegba out of panic on hearing the threat of attack and invasion by the Aku Uka, consulted an oracle who prescribed an almost impossible sacrifice of his beloved daughter to the gods to avert the impending danger. Ayegba's terribly sad look conveyed to his daughter the ominous message but Inikpi, courageously told her father she was prepared to die to save the Igala tribe from imminent danger as prescribed by the oracle. The Hausas (Bebe from Kano) who were resident at Idah then prepared a deadly medicines(what could be referred today as chemical or biological warfare) and deep in the upper waters of the Inachalo stream near where the enemies had camped. The medicine gave rise to abundance of fish and when the hungry Jukun fighters saw this, they sumptuously consumed the fish but with disastrous consequences. Diarrhea struck their camp, killing hundreds of them. As soon as Ayegba men heard of it, they descended on them killing them and others fled giving rise to the permanent victory and freedom of the Igala people. Consequently, Inikpi and two of her brother Idoko and Ogado, nine slaves and nine calabashes filled with valuable things were buried alive at a distance of some yards from the river bank at Ega. The statue of Inikpi stands on her grave up till today. Inikpi did for the Igala people what Jesus Christ did for the entire world. This gave rise to the establishment of the Igala political Kingdom. It was this that brought about the independence for the Igala people. It is instructive to note that Ayegba was not renowned for his military prowess alone but for his administrative ability. Hence, the Igala system of government was introduced by the first Attah and developed by the succeeding Attahs before colonial incursion.

Furthermore, even though there were several Atta presiding over the Igala political kingdom, our point of departure started from the era of Attah

Ayegba Om’Idoko. The reason for this is because the Attah Ayegba Om’Idoko won for the Igala an independent kingdom. Prior to his era, Igala was a vassal (a nation dependent on another) of Aku Uka of Wukari. During his reign, he declared the Igala people independent in a war which he defeated the Jukun force that was sent to discipline for his deviant act in office. After the Igala-Jukun war, Attah Ayegba reorganized his kingdom by appointing his sons, relations and trustworthy friends as Chief (Onu) or district heads. No wonder he is often referred to as not only the founder of Igala kingdom but also the founder of present ruling Igala dynasty.

The Pre-colonial Political Administration of the Igala Kingdom

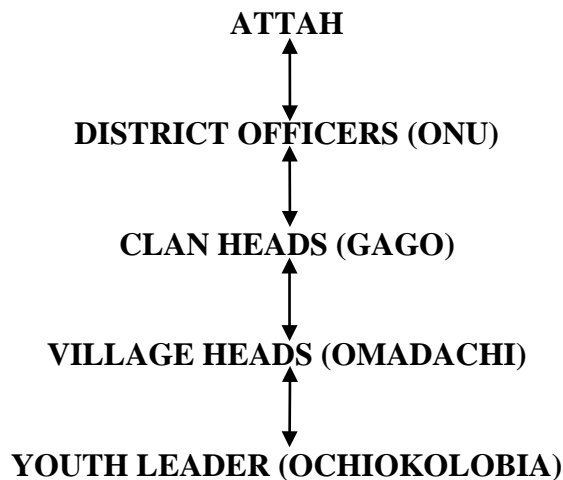
The Igala had a relatively powerful system in the pre-colonial period and even formed the Kabba province with some other ethnic groups during the colonial and post colonial period. The province was part of the Northern region until 1967 when it formed part of Kwara state and later became part of Benue and finally Kogi in 1991. Although available literature has shown that there were three (3) proto dynastic period before the emergence of Attah, Ayegba Om’ Idoko, the central theme as Ijoma(2007) has noted is that, of all the accounts, it is the role of Ayegba as the creator of the system of hereditary title on which Igala political organization depends. Ukwedeh (2003) had also observed that in about the second decade of the 17th century, the process of the evolution of the dynastic rule, which started in the 16th century, had become consolidated under Ayegba Om’Idoko. Under this dynastic rule, there was no longer the rotation of power between the different Igala-Mela patrilineages, but there was a system of succession within the same royal dynasty.

The Igala kingdom was a pre-colonial West African state of what is today known as Nigeria. The kingdom was founded by the Igala, a people living north of the Igbo with its capital at Idah. The first Attah (Father) of the independent Igala kingdom is known as Ayegba Om’ Idoko (Ayegba the son of Idoko) who led a war of liberation against the Jukun culminating in the sacrifice of his daughter, Inikpi to ensure victory. The Igala are ruled by a father figure called the Attah. The word Attah means father and the full title of ruler is Attah Igala meaning the father of Igalas. At the head of traditional, social and political organization was and is the king, called Attah who occupied the position of a unique ruler and was also a source of all patronage and justice in the kingdom.

The administration of the Igala kingdom especially after the Igala-Jukun war under the leadership of Attah Ayegba marked a remarkable reorganization of the kingdom. He reorganized the central administration, the Advisory council, Palace and District administration. Ayegba Om’ Idoko left a legacy of a good central administration, stable society and good economy

(Onucheyo,2005:13). The functions of the king in traditional Igala pre-colonial political system can be categorized into two dimensions (i) He was the head of the royal clan and (ii) the head of a centralized system of territorial administration.. He was also linked with the royal ancestors whose cult was one of the central theme of the Igala traditional religion and on the other hand, he was the ultimate custodian of the natural land shrine called Erane which symbolized the moral and spiritual welfare of Igala as a member of the same political community. However, there is a fusion of different political and ritual functions in a single institution- the Attah Igala. As Boston(1968) has rightly observed, in the administrative system by which the Igala are governed at the present time, territorial consideration are paramount, and the division of the kingdom into districts and village areas would form a natural starting point for any analysis of the modern system of government. It is instructive to note that in the Igala kingdom, agnatic links are followed to determine succession to hereditary political offices and to the many different statuses involved in the inheritance of rights over persons and property. Hereditary in the Igala kingdom is vested in the patrilinear groups called Olopu whose members' exercised jurisdiction over succession and inheritance. These, Boston (1968) argues are the groups around which public and political life revolved in the traditional system, and to which much of Igala life is still orientated at the present area.

The Attah Ayegba's district political administration was structured in the following patterns.



The government of the Igala can be said to have began with the Igala mela communities when they decided to organize themselves into a corporate entity. Each of the communities had a leader with the overall head of the community just like the present day governor who was called Onu. The local chiefs were allowed to take charge of the affairs of their domains

but cases and issues of succession to local thrones were referred to Idah, the capital of the kingdom for Attah's attention. The process of ascension is by hereditary and inheritance.

A district would consist of a number of villages each with a village head or a village chief who is in charge of a number of villages. The system of government at district levels is similar to that of Idah, the kingdom capital. They collected tributes part of which was sent to Idah and what remained would be used for the upkeep of the province. As much as possible, they were in charge of all district affairs but cases of murder, deposition and succession were referred to the Attah at Idah. In the district administration, Attah Ayegba appointed his sons, trustworthy relatives and followers as district heads. The district heads also decentralized and delegated responsibilities and authority as it was not possible to administer the whole kingdom directly from Idah at this period. Clans are the structural units of the Igala political system as such, the head of clan (Onu) has the same judicial powers as the royal provincial chief and also perform the same administrative functions of maintaining order and collecting tributes within the districts under their jurisdiction

The Palace administration. In the Attah's palace, there were two groups of officials-the royal servants called (Amedibo) and the Attah's eunuchs (Amonoji) who were central to the palace administration. These palace chiefs performed the following functions of protecting the Attah and also helped in mobilizing the people to repair houses, the palace walls and carried messages to the districts and collected tributes for the Attah. They acted as intermediaries between the Attah and his chiefs as well as his subjects. They also protected the Attah's treasuries, royal robes and regalia. The eunuchs protected the Attah's wives and performed rituals for the Attah. Ogbe, the head of the Attah judicial court presided over the Attah's court and informed the Attah of the court proceedings.

Attah's palace administration was based on democratic principles. For instance, in Igala, it is often said that: Onu noja oja n'onu (meaning the King owns the people and the people own the king). The Attah operated a decentralized system of government with council members like today's minister in different areas and portfolio respectively.

The Atah's Councilors. Within the reigning lineage, the body of royal councilors represented both the Atta's own direct line of descent and the various collateral branches. In relation to the ruling house itself, the council formed a council of elders often referred to as Aboguju Olopu. The council as Boston (1968) has noted was the executive body and corporate representative of the ruling house and in a wider sense, the functions of the councilors are sufficiently well defined. The councilors also acted as intermediaries, Ohiegba, between the locality concerned and the central

government in judicial, political and other matters. The titled (portfolio) councilors were also responsible for mobilizing the royal army in time of war and on major expeditions accompanied the king into the field as the head of their own contingent.

Judicial Functions

One of the most important functions of governments all over the world from the ancient to the contemporary is the dispensation of justice to its citizens and the Igala political kingdom was and is not left out of this function as it rendered judicial services to its subjects. In Idah, the capital of the Igala kingdom as well as in the districts, disputes among individuals and groups were settled before family heads. Those between one family group and another were settled by heads of both group and family who sought to reach compromise for the purpose of peace and stability.

In the districts, the district rulers referred to as the Onu exercised both judicial and executive powers; the village chiefs popularly called Omadachi and Gago handled divorce cases, land disputes and several other minor cases but cases of murder and treason were reserved exclusively for Attah's attention. Attah's court (Ogbede) was the highest court located in front of Ede market which day's cases were heard publicly. Attah was the president of the court but because of many engagements, such power was delegated to one of the senior eunuchs called Ogbe who acted as president of the court. Ogbe acted as president of the court took final decisions on minor and non complicated cases while serious ones would be referred to the Attah for final decisions. Available records reveal that Ochalla Angna and Olimamu Attah both Islamic clerics served as court scribes (what is today known as court clerks) and records of proceedings were written and kept in Arabic. This system was and is very effective as few cases are expected to be reported to the police. Acrimony and bitterness which could arise from cases reported to the police were reduced to the barest minimum.

Defence of the Kingdom

Unlike the modern state where we have standing army, the Igala kingdom had no standing army but there was initiation preparedness where adults were initiated and weapons were amassed awaiting any eventuality. Weapons such as arrows, bows, cutlasses, spears, shields and charms were abundantly stored in the armory. In the absence of standing army, servants, attendants, slaves and a large numbers of local farmers were mobilized and deployed for operation during wars. In the Igala political kingdom, Attah's chief were at the head of those local armies but in serious wars such as the one between the Igalas and Jukuns, Attah himself would lead the battle.

Maintenance of Law and Order

In the Igala political kingdom, there was no standing police force like the contemporary Nigeria Police Force for the purpose of maintaining law and order but Attah and most of the senior chiefs had several servants, attendants, slaves and eunuchs who protect their persons and property. They were also on the watch out for any slightest public disturbance or unrest. In case of such occurrence, they would be dispatched to restore and maintain peace instantly.

The Decline and Collapse of the Igala kingdom.

The decline and collapse of the Igala kingdom began in the 18th Century and finally collapsed and lost its sovereignty and independence in 1900. Both internal and external factors gave rise to the collapse of the Igala kingdom as there was no established written constitution with binding sanctions on the people across the entire kingdom.

Internally, the sheer size of the kingdom contributed immensely to its collapse. As the kingdom began to grow in size, it became more difficult to keep the distant districts under the full control of the Attah due to poor communication and logistics of that period.

Another internal factor that led to the collapse of the Igala kingdom was the absence of a constitution binding on all the districts that constituted the kingdom. The Igala kingdom was a loose state where the district heads in the north east for instance exercised a kind of autonomy thereby making the Attah to lose grip over the entire kingdom.

The third factor that contributed to the collapse of the Igala kingdom was the breakup of Igala mela. With the breakup of Igala mela, Igalamela chiefs were removed from state advisory council on the ground that the Attah Ameh Ocheja accused the Igala mela chief of assassinating his predecessor Attah Ekelega and replaced them with royal councilors. Consequently, the Igala mela chief who had checked the excesses and activities of the oppressive Attah could not perform this function after their removal from the council.

The last internal factor was the collapse of the Igala state economy. The decline of the slave economy which was the main stay of the Igala state economy contributed immensely to the collapse of the kingdom. The Igala people had trade with European but in 1841, Attah Ameh Ocheje signed the treaty on the abolition of the slave trade and the trade in palm produce was still at infancy stage and as such, could not sustain the Igala state economy which was initially dependent on the slave economy. This made it practically difficult for the Igala kingdom to sustain itself.

External Factors

One of the major external factors that led to the collapse of the Igala kingdom was the Fulani Jihad which was launched in Sokoto in 1804. The Jihad reached the confluence of the Niger and Benue by 1850. In 1853, Etsu Masaba of Nupe took over Koton Karfe and Lokoja, then part of the Igala kingdom and the Igbirra kingdom of Panda which was destroyed. By 1854, the Fulani jihad had become a real threat to the kingdom as the southern bank became flooded with refugees who carried out sporadic raids in Ife districts.

Another external factor that affected the collapse of the Igala kingdom was the European economic intervention which came in a commercial form of the Royal Niger Company with its activities after it has been granted a Royal Charter by the British government. Its activities stretched from Asaba, its headquarters to Jebba in the River Niger and Ubi in the Benue river. The company opened its trading posts at Idah, Itobe, Gbobe and Bagana. The RNC made unfavourable trade regulations that ruined the economy and treasury of the Igala kingdom.

In addition to this, the declaration of the Northern and Southern protectorate in 1900 where the British government formally took over the administration of the territories compounded the problem. With the death of Attah Amaga in February 1900, the independent sovereign state of the Igala kingdom came to an end.

Conclusion

The Igala pre-colonial political administration played an important role, not only within the confines of the confluence basin, but far beyond the area. The traditions of Nupe, Jukun, Benin, Igbo and Igala and its immediate neighbours indicate ties of great antiquity. The Igala influence is today manifest in central Nigeria and parts of Igbo land. As Abdullahi (2006) had noted, Igala kingdom was the only most powerful kingdom between 16th and 18th century after defeating our brothers Jukun, Binis and Hausa/Fulani jihadist. The kingdom, he added, was most cherished, famous and prosperous, so that it affected a wider scope of societies and regions far away from its base. But when compared with the bureaucratic organization of other larger kingdoms in Africa, the Igala system is relatively weak in administrative officers. The poor development of administrative institutions in this kingdom may not be unconnected to the fluidity of territorial groupings within the political system. However, the Igala political kingdom has demonstrated to a great extent the operation of democratic principles manifested in the nature of power and responsibilities being delegated and the performance of administrative functions in different institutions. Commenting on the form of government of the Igala kingdom, Clifford cited

in Boston(1968:69), noted that: the form of government exercised by the Attas was simple and effective. At the centre was the Atta himself as Priest/King with the Achadu as Chief executive, then the hereditary officers of state (kinsmen of the reigning Atta) and a council composed of the 9 Igala chieftain. Hence, we can conclude that the Igala kingdom had a semi centralized system of government before the advent of colonial domination in Nigeria.

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