

# **Diplomacy and Emirate Formation: The Integration of the Igbomina into the Ilorin Emirate in the 19th Century**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the mode of integration of the Igbomina into the Ilorin emirate system in the light of the prevailing controversy surrounding the subject. Available oral and written sources of the historical account on the relationship between the two sub-groups are examined to see how much they could be relied upon as authentic historical sources. From various lines of argument adduced for and against diplomacy and conquest as the likely mode of integration of the Igbomina into Ilorin emirate system, it would appear that diplomacy was the probable mode of integration of the Igbomina into the Ilorin emirate system.

## **Introduction**

The Igbomina could be described as a heterogeneous sub-group of the Yoruba who migrated to the present place of settlement from various locations and at different times between the 14th and 17th century A.D (Dada, 1985:1) They presently occupy the southeast of Ilorin within Longitude  $8^{\circ}$  and  $9^{\circ}$  North and Latitude  $4^{\circ}$  and  $6^{\circ}$  West (Adeyemi, 1984:7-8). Thus, the Igbominaland is bounded on the west by Ilorin, to the northeast are the Yagba while the south eastern part is occupied by the Ekiti. Igbomina's northern boundary is shared with the Nupe and the southern part is with the Yoruba of Osun State. While the largest concentration of Igbomina resides in Kwara State, a considerable proportion could be found in Osun State especially Ila Orangun, Oke-Ila and Ora Igbomina.

Although the Igbomina has a tradition of origin that attempts to explain the origin of their common language, culture and political institutions from their descent through a single ancestry, Oduduwa, they were never united under a single political authority (Atanda, 1973:132). Each of them was split into a large number of tiny political units. This perhaps more than any other factor influenced the pattern of resistance to various foreign intruders like the Nupe and the Fulani of Ilorin.

For the Igbomina, foreign domination started not with the British presence in the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, rather it began with the extension of Oyo suzerainty over the territory early in her history and continued with Nupe incursions and Ilorin imperial dominance (Ibiloye, 1994:27). With the establishment of imperial presence through the planting of colonies and appointment of agents called *Ajele* to oversee various Igbomina towns and villages, the domination of Igbomina by these African imperialists was complete and this was no less humiliating or distasteful than the British colonial presence in Nigeria. Igbominaland fell under the category of smaller kingdom allegorically described by scholars as constantly being menaced and subdued by the consuming imperial ambitions of its bigger

neighbours (Ibiloye, 1994:27). First in the series of her capitulation was her subordination under the hegemonious influence of Oyo at a period which cannot be easily determined, but however terminated with the revolt of Afonja in the early part of the 19th century. Then came the first phase of Nupe incursions which took place in the 18th century at a period when Oyo influence still dominated Igbomina but was however, dwindling as the ageing empire was at the terminal stage of her existence as a virile polity. The situation at this time could be described as one of overlapping imperial interests as the Etsu Nupe seemed to have seized control in those Igbomina villages where Oyo political control was no longer effective or relevant (Ibiloye, 1994:55-65).

Ilorin imperial dominance came in quick succession during the first half of the 19th century with the collapse Oyo and the successful take off of Ilorin Emirate. Contemporaneous with it was the second phase of Nupe/ Fulani intrusion into northern Igbomina country, which led to a permanent division of the land into two distinguishable sub-cultural units, the *Mosan* and *Moyee* (Dada, 1985: 24). While the mode of integration into each of these erstwhile kingdoms and empires (Oyo and Nupe) were never disputed, the case of Igbomina relation with Ilorin Emirate seemed to have been an exception to the general rule. Oral and written sources in Nupe and Igbominaland corroborate the claim that conquest was the mode of integration of Igbomina into Nupe kingdom and even the latter Nupe/ Fulani Emirate (Nadel, 1965:406-40). So also was the Ibadan (*Aganigan*) intrusion and foraging through Igbomina country confirmed by written and oral traditions (Ibiloye, 1994:73-74). However, the Igbomina claimed that they were never conquered by the Ilorin but were tricked into subordination through friendship of equal status translated into subservience with the passage of time (Ibiloye, 1994:73-74).

This age long controversy between the Igbomina and Ilorin on the mode of integration has generated very little interest in scholarly circles as only very few researchers have endeavoured to mention it as part of their research efforts or findings. Those who did at all did so very casually as if the subject does not deserve serious attention. However, it may neither be fair nor objective to dismiss this claim outright without subjecting it to rigorous historical scrutiny (Ibiloye, 1994:73-74).

This paper therefore examines the credibility or otherwise of Igbomina claim that they were not conquered but rather tricked into subordination by a friend and ally. The study examines the various sources of our knowledge of the history of Ilorin/Igbomina relation in the 19th century, both oral and written and the extent to which each could be absolutely relied upon as an objective and dependable historical source.

### **A Critique of the Current State of the Historiography on the Ilorin Emirate**

It would not be out of place to conjecture that our present state of knowledge of the history of Ilorin/Igbomina relations has been passed down to us through Ilorin scholars or Ilorin influenced traveller's accounts. Travellers / explorers in the 19th century visited mainly major centres of political activities and their views, as reflected in their writings, were determined or greatly influenced by prejudices of their sources of information. Explorers like Mango Park, the Lander brothers (Richard and John) and others were known to have

visited Katunga (Oyo), Sokoto, Dahomey and wrote extensively mostly on centralised kingdoms to the neglect of the smaller non-centralised states.

Therefore, Ilorin perspectives could not but be reflected in most of the historical accounts currently in circulation. For instance, Ilorin not only enjoyed monopoly in Arabic literacy, through which most of such events were recorded most travellers' accounts also reflect a deep leaning to Ilorin version of the story (Ibn Bakri, nd). It should be noted also that travellers' accounts were also gathered from the metropolis, which constituted the main centre of political authority in the emirate (Clark, 1972 & Campbell, 1861).

Arabic manuscripts mostly originating from Ilorin or Ilorin influenced sources are not by any way better in this farrago of extreme bias for the Ilorin version of Igbomina's integration into the Ilorin Emirate. Thus, an extreme Islamic historiographical approach to issues which sees all things that are un-Islamic as bad and evil could not have treated Igbomina, the "pagan" any better than it did. Indeed, Igbomina's subordination could not have been through any other means except through Jihad to suppress the "infidel."

Therefore, most of the existing written sources on the nature of the relationship between Ilorin and Igbomina, especially those dating back to the 19th century (whether in Roman or Arabic manuscript) should be treated with extreme caution. They in most cases, represent only one side perception of the historical events they describe. They should therefore be subjected to thorough historical searchlight for proven authenticity and should not be taken at face value.

### **Diplomacy as a Weapon of War**

Pre-colonial Nigerian societies have had to contend with the issues of integration to sustain themselves as viable polities for several centuries. As empires and kingdoms within the enclave grew in size and strength, smaller polities and states were incorporated into the expanding empires through either diplomacy or conquest. The concept of integration is so important in the transformation process of incorporating diverse ethnic groups into nation state that it has attracted various definitions from scholars. Doro and Stultz (1970: 171) see integration as the cumulative effect of individual allegiance to and identification with society and its goal. Related to this is Pye (1966: 65) definition which can be summarised as bridging the gap between groups by "subsuming" their narrow interests in terms of culture, language and ethnic affinity to the larger interest of the national community. However, for the purpose of this paper, we will accept the simple definition from Lee (1969) which describes integration as the incorporation of separate ethnic or religious elements of the population into a unified society.

Just as these definitions of integration may be adequate to modern nations, they are equally applicable to the developments in the Ilorin / Igbomina relations in the 19th century. The issue at stake here is whether the initial incorporation of the Igbomina into the Ilorin emirate system was achieved through act of diplomacy or war. Diplomacy, like warfare, was an instrument of state policy in the 19th century Ilorin Emirate Administration (Danmole, 1987:46). The art of diplomacy for which Ilorin was well known among the Yoruba was equally important to the ability of the emirate to survive. Indeed, the employment of diplomacy by rulers of Ilorin began in the early days of the emirate before the first emir had

even consolidated his position. Abd al-salami he says, used a combination of diplomacy and military force to deal with his rivals (Law, 1987:47). Whereas he used tact and diplomacy with Bako, the then Sarkin Gambari at Ilorin, he combined diplomacy with force against Solagberu, the Yoruba Muslim leader at Okesuna (Hermon-Hodge, 1929:68). Ilorin interfered in Nupe politics for more than four decades through diplomacy and where diplomacy failed, she resorted to military expeditions. In as much as Ilorin was interested in warfare she did not close the door to diplomatic avenues if such avenue would achieve the same objective.

The use of diplomacy, however, could sometimes be a veritable sign of weakness on the part of the user and a clear apprehension of the possibility of being overwhelmed by greater forces around. This could be clearly discerned in the pattern of alliances Ilorin entered into with neighbouring states in the face of perceived threats to her existence during the turbulent years of Yoruba civil wars in the 19th century (Danmole, 1987:47; Law, 1997: 296). So also in its relationship with the Igbomina, the use of diplomacy cannot be totally ruled out. Apart from the character traits that suggest the possibility of the use of “trick” (diplomacy), a few documentary evidences could be adduced which point to the use of diplomacy by Ilorin in its relation and mode of integration of the Igbomina into the emirate system. These references point to alliances between Ilorin and Igbomina potentates in the pre-emirate and the early years of the war that brought the emirate into being (Law, 1977:296).

For instance, it has been argued that Afonja at a point of desperation and in an attempt to ensure the success of his rebellion against the Alafin “formed an alliance with Olupo of Ajasse-Ipo, the principal ruler in Igbomina province of Oyo kingdom” (Law, 1977:250). By logical inference, such alliance and friendship was possibly transferred to subsequent authority at Ilorin succeeding to Afonja’s position especially, in the face of shifting alliance that characterised the early years of Ilorin Emirate administration. Evidences abound that in the events that ultimately culminated in the termination of Afonja’s reign at Ilorin, alliances were freely transferred from one group to another between the Fulani and Afonja groups.

An example was the support Solagberu, a close friend of Afonja, lent to the Fulani against his former friend (Johnson, 1976:203) in the light of the turbulent political atmosphere that pervaded the first three decades of the 19th century in Yorubaland. Therefore based on perception of where their interest could best be served, Igbomina people chose to ally themselves with the Fulani of Ilorin whom they perceived as a lesser evil relative to Ibadan. It was easy to reduce the weaker partner in such alliance to subordination in the face of general insecurity. Dada (1985:4) suggests that when Alimi took over from Afonja, the Igbomina people were with him. This could be interpreted to mean that there was a simple transfer of allegiance and friendship after the defeat of Afonja. Ajayi (1974:141) records that several chiefs who resisted subjugation under Ilorin chose to collaborate with it in their efforts to frustrate the rebirth of the old Oyo monarchy. Igbomina was probably one of such collaborators as there was no evidence of a single serious pitched battle between Ilorin and Igbomina to demonstrate objection to imposition of alien rule.

Similar allusion was made to friendship between Elese Abidolu, the founder of the present ruling dynasty in Igbaja, and Alfa Alimi, founder of the Fulani emirate at Ilorin. Abidolu was said to be a great friend of Alimi and that Abidolu fought several wars on Ilorin's side on account of this friendship. The friendship, the source goes further, led to the conversion of Abidolu to Islam and his being turbaned in 1883 as the first Muslim Elese of Igbaja. It was this friendship that was probably translated into subordination with passage of time by subsequent Ilorin Emirs who did not know the basis of the friendship between Abidolu and Alfa Alimi. It was most probable that the spirit of these alliances and friendship between the various Igbomina groups and Ilorin referred to above placed Igbomina within the fold of the Ilorin / Ekiti Parapo confederate camp against Ibadan during the Kiriji and Erin-Mope wars (Ibiloye, 1994:103).

This was another evidence of co-operation between Ilorin and Igbomina people in the turbulent years of the Yoruba civil war and it is only logical to assume that the Igbomina were willing ally in all these military adventures considering the frequency of their occurrence. If the joint exploits were not voluntary the occasion of Ilorin's defeat by Ibadan at Erin-Mope would have been a most auspicious time for Igbomina to revolt and stage a mutiny in the war camp or even betray the common cause. This was common in Yorubaland throughout the 19th century. Absolute loyalty and commitment, such as demonstrated by the Igbomina, could not have been possible in a situation of involuntary service or subservience. One is then tempted to suspect that what governed Ilorin/Igbomina relationship in the 19th century was more complex than a mere lord / vassal relationship secured through forcible integration.

Several oral evidences abound in Igbominaland, which refute Ilorin's claim to military victory over Igbomina. It is needless preoccupying ourselves with naming all sources relating to this subject. Indeed, nearly all sources from Igbomina refute subjugation while those originating from Ilorin confirmed it (Fakeye, Dada & Ekinrin, 1978). The complex process of transforming a relationship to vassalage may not be that obvious to the modern historian. The descendants of Abidolu of Igbaja, the affable friend of Alimi of Ilorin became slaves to the succeeding authority at Ilorin. If the above premise is accepted, then Igbomina servitude was rightly a logical consequence of a friendship turned sour.

### **Integration through Conquest**

Sound and plausible as these arguments in favour of diplomacy are, they are difficult to be sustained against the available and overwhelming documentary evidences that point to integration through conquest. One of such clear reference to conquest explained that after the overthrow of Afonja in Ilorin, Alimi was said to have incorporated all northern Yoruba towns one after the other into the Ilorin Emirate (Anene, 1970:151-152). Of course this assertion contradicts other sources which believe that Alimi himself did not fight to expand the Emirate and that responsibility for this rested with his son Abdul Salami who was regarded as the first emir.

Details of numerous references to conquest of the Igbomina during the reign of Abdul Salami are also contained in Adeyemi (1984:37). Also Elphinstone (1921) explains how Abdul Salami declared war upon the whole of Yorubaland and how Igbomina clan were conquered. Olupo of Ajasse-Ipo was said to have made submission to Ali Balogun Gambari and Ajia

Gaju, the two representatives of the Ilorin invading army. Orangun of Ila was over powered and taken prisoner to Ilorin together with other Igbomina chiefs. They were later released and allowed to return to their countries. Interestingly, these authors rely on Adeyemi (1984) for their submissions.

Significantly, this present study also disagrees with one aspect of Adeyemi's work, which refers, in the affirmative to the "laconic" presentation by Ahmed Ibn Bakri Kokoro, of how the emir (Abdul Salami) sent an army which routed the Igbomina in three days (Adeyemi, 1984:37). Ibn Bakri (an Ilorin Islamic historian) wrote his book during the reign of Emir Sulaiman (1896-1915), precisely in 1912, over eighty years after the event he described. As an Ilorin scholar who was writing from a prejudiced Ilorin perspective, his view could not but be coloured by prejudices natural to his circumstances and environment. The author himself confessed to the fact that he was writing from established tradition in Ilorin. He wrote, inter-alia "And I shall mention in this book what I have heard and what I remember, what I witness in (my own) time" (Ibn Bakri, 1912:1). The authenticity of such remembered eyewitness account, juxtaposed with established tradition derived from biased Islamic texts cannot be taken as laconic or gospel truth as Adeyemi seems to suggest in his presentation of evidence to affirm that the integration of Igbomina into the Ilorin Emirate was through conquest.

Similarly, Ibn Bakri (1912) could not have been an eyewitness to the events of 1831, the probable year of the purported conquest of the Igbomina, which was about eighty years from the time of his writing. Nor had the Igbomina, any unified central army in the 1830's that could be made a target of attack and routed in three days by Abdul Salami (Ibiloye, 1994:106). Even if the conquest of the area was made possible and easy by the sparse population and a general lack of centralised army and administration, absolute subjugation could only be achieved through military operation conducted from village to village. That should definitely take more than three days to achieve considering the size and topography of the area.

As evident in most of the referenced sources and the extent of Ilorin Emirate administrative coverage, Ilorin military activities must have been limited to southern Igbomina towns such as Igbo-Owu, Idofian, Ila-Orangun, and Omu- Aran, most of which either quietly submitted to or collaborated with the invader with little resistance because of the inherent advantages of active co-operation rather than resistance. Definitely northern Igbomina towns such as Oke-Ode, Share, Oro-Ago Ile-Ire and Ora were left to the conquering forces of the Nupe Emirate. Therefore, it is out of place to claim that the entire Igbominaland was "routed in three days by Abdul Salami"

It is also pertinent to mention that if the eyewitness chronicles of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) were anything to go by, it is clear that eyewitness account could be extremely unreliable. The civil war veteran who wrote on the events that they actively participated in their various autobiographies, have clearly demonstrated that it could be extremely difficult, even in modern time, for eyewitnesses to out-grow the tendency for self glorification. Thus,

19th century pro-Ilorin scholars could but be prejudiced in their various accounts on the patterns of intergroup relations between Ilorin and its neighbours.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that diplomacy major part in the process of Igbomina's integration into the Ilorin Emirate system. Indeed, if the claim by the Igbomina not to have been conquered by Ilorin was borne out of sheer ethnic chauvinism, then it should be expected that such a denial syndrome could as well have applied to other similar relationships between the Igbomina on the one hand, and other groups such as Oyo, Nupe, and Ibadan on the other. The series of invasions of Igbomina by these groups with the exception of Ilorin are confirmed by Igbomina's oral traditions. It is in the light of these that this research concludes that the mode of Igbomina integration into the Ilorin Emirate system was rather more complex than just a sweep of military adventure. Diplomacy definitely played a pivotal role.

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