

The Evolution and Development of Central Administration in Ebiraland, 1920-1997.

By Victor Osaro Edo

Abstract

Ebiraland constitutes one of the ethnic groups in the Middle Belt zone of Nigeria. It, however, did not evolve a centralized form of leadership until the advent of the British colonial authorities, which brought together the various Ebira groups under the leadership of Attah Omadivi in 1902. The year 1902 therefore marked the evolution of a monarchical form of administration and the gradual development of central administration in Ebiraland. The paper will therefore examine the nature of the development of central administration in Ebiraland between 1902 and 1997, when the present incumbent monarch, Ado Ibrahim, ascended the throne as the Ohinoyi of Ebiraland.

Introduction

Ebiraland is a small hilly inland area that stretches roughly for twenty three kilometres west of the Niger at Ajaokuta and thirty two kilometers southwest of the Niger-Benue confluence. The range of hills occasionally rises to six hundred and sixty seven metres above sea level. With the exception of natural barriers like forest reserves, practically, the area which is about eighty square kilometers has been occupied and what started as tiny villages have joined together as near towns, gradually and progressively expanding towards one another in modern times. Ebiraland thus presents an aerial view of one huge settlement with intervening barriers.

Today, in a Nigeria of thirty-six states, the Ebira people are located in the present Kogi State. Farming is their major occupation. Several Ebira people, however, are scattered all over Nigeria, particularly in Edo, Ondo, Kwara, Plateau and Benue States where they are well known as indefatigable farmers.

The Ebira people are generally believed to be of Jukun origin. Oral tradition favours this theory and also claims its ultimate ancestry from the Jukun of Wukari¹. The people are said to have resented the central

administrative authority of the Junkuns in the Wukari area of the Kwararafa kingdom. Thus, the Ebira, like other disparate ethnic groups, migrated under their leader whose actual personal name has remained unknown, though one account has it that he was called Ebira.² They migrated frequently and at different times from one unsuitable spot to another as an expression of their resentment against tyrannical rule, among other reasons. In the case of the former reasons, they did so in order to free themselves from the resented bondage and clutches of the Jukuns and headed southwards before the end of the sixteenth century.³ However, they were settled at home in groups without a centralised authority until the advent of colonial rule which brought them together under a central leadership. If there was any form of centralization in Ebiraland, it was in the sphere of religion. Politically, the different groups and settlements had independent clan heads with different nomenclatures. Hence, the Ebira people did not evolve a centralised political leadership and had no paramount chief before the British occupation of the area in 1902.

Pre-Colonial Ebira community was essentially segmentary. It consisted of five principal clans among several others, namely, Okengwe, Eika, Okehi, Adavi, and Ihima. The respective priests (heads) of these clans were known as Ohindase, Adeika, Ohiomahi, Asema and Obonbanyi.⁴ Each clan was self-governing and did not regard any other as superior to it. Significantly, the clan was the main unit of political organization. The post of the clan head was normally conferred on the oldest living male member of the clan. His religious duties and disciplinary powers were, however, limited to his own family. His political influence was quite small and although he presided over the meetings of his clan, his judgement was determined largely by the consensus of opinion of the elders.

Economically, the clan head held in trust for the clan, part of the income from all the clan lands, such as the produce from palm oil and locust bean trees, during the pre-colonial period. Also, the leg of whatever game that was killed was given to him, which he shared with the kindred heads⁵.

Early Administration

In the pre-colonial times, the administration of all the clan heads constituting a community in Ebiraland lay in the hands of the elders, influential individuals and the chief priest (Ohinoyi).⁶ The group of elders consisted of the clan heads, kindred heads and other people whose age, maturity and wisdom commended themselves to the other elders. The composition of this group was more-or-less constant because whenever the representative of a clan died, his place was taken by another member of the same clan. For this reason, the group could, in fact, be termed the council of elders. Its meeting normally took place in the market place or any other central open place⁷, as was the case with the Igbo in the pre-colonial period. In the same vein, Habibu A. Sani argues that in those early days of the ancestors, whenever there was a problem to be collectively solved or a special occasion to be celebrated, the clan heads and age-group leaders usually put their heads together at a family meeting where possible solutions were debated and agreed⁸.

An influential individual (Onoru) might be any man (apart from the Chief Priest) who, because of personal attainments in wealth, war, physical or marginal power had won the respect of others and could become famous not only in his own clan group, but throughout Ebiraland.⁹ However, he had no political authority in other clan groups. By virtue of his position in society, he normally succeeded in imposing his will upon others or in getting the meeting of the council of elders to respect his views. He could therefore be regarded as the *de facto* head or co-ordinator of the council of elders. In many respects, the Onoru's word was law because the people feared going against him as he could deal with them severely through the use of physical force or otherwise. In fact, this was the main, apart from the council of elders, around whom political authority revolved. The meeting of elders could hardly take a decision whenever he was absent, because it was realized that were he to be opposed to it, he could obstruct its execution¹⁰. The philosophy and practice was that might was right, and so it was in practice.

The office of the chief priest was rotated, from clan to clan or from kindred to kindred. The chief priest was the overall religious head of the Epira community and the position was occupied on a rotational basis among the five major clans that formed the community. It was the responsibility of the clan whose turn it was to provide an incumbent. On this ground, one can talk of central leadership in Ebiraland, which had the responsibility of co-ordinating the affairs of the council of elders in the pre-colonial period. The function of the office was basically religious. The chief priest saw to the well-being of the society. He made sure that peace was maintained in the land and settled quarrels among the clans whenever the need arose. Politically, he was usually responsible for calling the meetings of the council of elders to discuss and decide on any pressing problem(s) in the interest of the community. The office of the chief priest did not normally go to the oldest man, but to a middle-aged man, though maturity was a considering factor¹¹. Two or more candidates might compete or be earmarked for the position, but it was up to the meeting of the council of elders of the clan to decide who was the most suitable.¹²

Knowledge of the priesthood and the various rituals as well as divination, by the would-be or prospective candidate, were of advantage. The people who had the final say in the selection process and determined who was chosen were the diviners.¹³ If they all agreed that the proposed man had divine support, all was well. Nobody would be made chief priest against the decision of the diviners and hardly would any individual ever dare to assume the office without divine support. Having been selected, the failure to perform his duties or the occurrence of calamities during a priestly tenure of office could mean death for him and it would mean a bad reputation for his clan, which sometimes led to its being excluded from holding the chieftaincy¹⁴.

The duties of the Chief priest, therefore, were primarily religious; to keep the land or the country good. He presided over all public religious occasions and fertility cult ceremonies and was closely identified with the crops. The supervision and the timing of the annual nocturnal ancestral worship festival was one of his most important duties because it was believed that unless

the festival was celebrated at the correct time, calamity would follow¹⁵. In sum therefore, the chief priest performed religious, political and economic functions and was the rallying force until the colonial period, when a new kind of political leadership, to bring all Ebira communities under a central authority was fashioned out by the British colonialist through their policy or method of divide and rule.

The Advent of the British

The foregoing observations were in place when the British conquered Ebiraland in 1902. In the light of the British system of administration, the political organization in Ebiraland did not meet the aspirations of the British administrators; hence there was the need for a central leader to whom authority could be delegated by the British colonial power. The Ebira were therefore forced to look for an influential person to take charge of the affairs of the area under the British administration. This was the beginning of real central administration in a society that was hitherto non-centralised. The influential individual and the chief priest would not fit into the kind of central leadership required by the indirect rule system as neither of them was ready to submit to the control of the British authorities. Reference is made below to the role of Agidi, an influential individual, who stood against British occupation of Ebiraland. However, the British created one and imposed him on the Ebira as we shall demonstrate below.

Meanwhile, the evolution of central administration in Ebiraland, which resulted in the emergence of a monarchical institution, was not without some difficulties. First, was the task of turning a non-centralised society into a unitary administration. Second, was how to get a unifying leader acceptable to all. And third, was whether any clan was ready to surrender its independence to another. Nonetheless, the Ebira people were used to coming together in the face of crisis. Thus, in moments of war, they came together as a united front to ward off the incursion of the enemy. Indeed, the Ebira people had built strong confidence in their warfare and 'superior' weapons – bows and arrows. The invasion of Ebira

country by the Nupe (1865-1900) did not make them doubt their military superiority.¹⁶ The Nupe invaders were successfully resisted by the Ebira under a leader who later became Attah Omadivi. The Nupe invasion was organized in the form of raids for slaves. But the Ebira people were soon to realize that their warfare and their 'superior' weapons could not defend them against the British in 1902. In 1895, an outstation was placed at Kabba by the Royal Niger Company and a fort was built there by Captain Turner, an officer attached to the Niger Constabulary¹⁷.

On 1st January, 1900, Frederick Lugard took over the government of Northern Nigeria from the Royal Niger Company and hoisted the British flag at Lokoja¹⁸. Kabba was formed into a province which included the Akoko, Kukuruku and Ebira countries, and was administered from Lokoja, which was also the headquarters of the protectorate of Northern Nigeria, with Sir William Wallace as its first Resident.

In 1902, a small military escort led by Mr. Malcom and Lt. F.F.W. Byng-Hall sent into Ebira country was seen by the Ebira people as an incursion¹⁹. They refused to meet with the British demand for the supply of food, seeing this as a direct insult on their persons. Mr. Malcom and his party, outnumbered, were attacked with arrows by the Ebira and escaped by a night march to Kabba, arriving the next day. The British soldiers used this as casus belli and marched on them with fire arms. The Ebira country was subjugated and pacified. The resident in Ebiraland described the result of the expedition as follows: "The Ebira were no doubt severely punished during the expedition and I now find them very afraid of the whiteman"²⁰

With the defeat of the Ebira, the British then imposed their rule on them, politically uniting the various clans by force. The question that follows from here is: how did the British succeed in their mission? In an attempt to answer this question and trace the evolution of the institution of the monarchy in Ebiraland as from 1902, it is worth noting that in the British colonial history, the policy of indirect rule featured very prominently. Indirect rule was a principle whereby the people were ruled through their own traditional institutions.

Indirect rule as conceived by Lord Lugard was a dynamic system of Local government. The use of indigenous political institutions for the purpose of Local government was contingent upon certain modifications to the institutions. In places where there were no centralised leadership, the British administrators imposed one on the community. According to Michael Crowder:

The administrations imposed by the occupying powers were adhoc and greatly influenced by the personality of the man imposing them and the circumstances under which an area was being occupied, whether by treaty or by conquest. More important was the society to be governed. Different techniques were employed to govern the large centralised state, the small independent village, and the nomadic tribe.²¹

The British Conquest and the Imposition of Central Administration

During the British occupation of Ebiraland, Agidi, one of the notable personalities among the Ebira, led an armed resistance against any form of British rule. In 1902, he and his men attacked the small British group led by Mr. Malcom, the political officer.²² The latter barely escaped death. After this event, Ebiraland was declared a land of ‘savages’ and Mr Malcom ordered a detachment of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) to sit among them in order to ‘tame’ them.²³

In 1903, a punitive expedition under Major Marsh, Lieutenants Sparrenburg, Moran, Byng-Hall, Gallway, Smith, Oldman and Captain Lewis, was organized to call Agidi to order and to establish permanent peace in Ebiraland.²⁴ In this expedition, the British received the whole hearted co-operation of Omadivi, who was the representative of Ohindase Abogunde – the chief priest at the time. Omadivi, like Ohindase, was from the Okengwe clan. Omadivi supplied vital information, most especially on how to capture Agidi who was his political rival.²⁵ In fact, both Omadivi and Agidi were notable personalities or influential individuals in the Ebira of that time. While the former was loyal to the Chief priest, the latter was not. By 1904, Ebiraland was fully pacified and Mr. Morgan, the Resident of Kabba province, was able to say

with confidence that the Ebira people now feared the “whiteman” and were at “peace with each other”.²⁶

In gratitude to his co-operation, Omadivi was made the “Oivo Ohinoyi” (the whiteman’s chief) of Ebiraland. Omadivi could be compared with chief Dogho of Warri.²⁷ The latter provided skilled men and war canoes for the British in the Ebrohimi expedition of 1894. In the Benin expeditions of 1896-1897, Dogho was also at hand to aid the British. His services were appreciated and he was rewarded by being made the Governor of the Benin river.²⁸ Likewise, the leadership of Ebiraland fell on Omadivi in 1903 because of his loyalty to the British and he took the title of Attah,²⁹ synonymous with the title of the neighbouring Igala monarch.

Although the British appointed Attah Omadivi as the chief of Ebiraland, his power, until his death in 1917, was little felt outside his own clan. This was largely so because his appointment was not marched with the establishment of Native Administration. His appointment as the paramount chief nevertheless paved the way for the effective centralised political leadership that followed the establishment of a Native Authority in 1923.

Attah Omadivi died in 1917 and was succeeded by Arudi Adano who died within a few months. Not much was known about the short reign of Adano, the second Attah appointed by the British. However, his death in 1917 opened the stage for a fierce struggle for the position of paramount chief by a number of notable personalities.

There was therefore a search for a central chief whose loyalty and confidence, like Attah Omadivi, the British could vouch for. An influential man to take charge of the Native Administration was needed. Sir Frederick Lugard’s policy was to look for a capable man of influence to take charge of the Native Administration and through him the colonial authorities were to rule the indigenous populace. The British system of indirect rule was, after the 1914 Amalgamation, extended to the Southern provinces. In the eastern Nigeria, for example, warrant chiefs were appointed.³⁰ As far as the “Primitive Communities” in the north were concerned, Lugard stated that:

The first step is to endeavour to find a man of influence as chief, and to group under him as many villages or districts as possible, to teach him to delegate powers and to take interest in “Native Treasury”, to support his authority and to inculcate a sense of responsibility.³¹

In Ebiraland, after a tortuous struggle for the stool by many prominent leaders among whom were Ozigizigi, Owada Adidi, Onoruoiza Ibrahim and many others, the man of influence found was Onoruoiza Ibrahim,³² who represented Attah Omadivi in colonial administration. As we shall soon find out, Omadivi and Ibrahim were relations. Besides, Ibrahim was fairly literate, which enabled him to relate easily with the British administrators. He was therefore picked as Chief of the land. He also took the title of Attah. He reigned for thirty seven years from 1917 to 1954. In the official records he was simply referred to as Attah Ibrahim. Nonetheless, he faced serious oppositions from his people throughout his reign as he was considered an imposition by the British. Even then, towards the latter part of his reign he fell out with the British authorities, especially Sharwood Smith, the then British Governor of northern Nigeria.

Unlike Omadivi, his predecessor, Attah Ibrahim was made the paramount chief not only over Ebiraland but also over non-Ebira areas, such as Lokoja, Ogori, and Magongo.³³ His area of jurisdiction, which extended over 1520 sq² kilometres, became one of the largest in the northern Nigeria. Byng-Hall remarked in 1923 that if Attah Ibrahim had been an Hausa or born in one of the Hausa States, he would have been made an Emir.³¹ In the same year, he was promoted to a third class chief grade which was then the highest in the Kabba province.³⁵

As the paramount chief of the Ebira Division, Attah Ibrahim became the sole Ebira Native Authority controlling Grade B Court, which was the highest in the Division. The court could try criminal cases, pass bye-laws concerning marriage, divorce and inheritance. It could also impose jail sentences up to six months. In the newly created Ebira Division and Ebira Native Authority

therefore, Attah Ibrahim was vested with wide powers. F.F.W. Byng-Hall who had been the brain behind the creation remarked that the Attah Ibrahim's appointment as the paramount chief was "really the first time there has been any sort of one man administration."³⁶ But who was this Attah Ibrahim? What qualifications or qualities did he have to warrant his appointment?

Attah Ibrahim was the son of Zainebu (popularly known as Iy'ebe), who was a powerful and wealthy trader and a renowned figure in Ebira country. Zainebu was the daughter of the deceased "Oivo Ohinoyi", Attah Omadivi. Attah Ibrahim was also the maternal great grandson of the celebrated Ohindase Abogunde³⁷.

Descent wise, Attah Ibrahim was connected with the two most renowned families in Ebiraland, namely Omadivi and Ohindase Abogunde. But descent in traditional Ebira society as Y.A. Ibrahim correctly pointed out, "did not necessarily qualify one to hold any important state office"³⁸ Moreover, in a patrilineal society like Ebira, premium is not placed on connection through the female line.

If maternal descent disqualified Ibrahim from holding an important public office, his personal qualities, loyalty and service to the colonial government endeared him to the British administrators, especially Byng-Hall. Besides, the position of Ebira central chief was a colonial creation and so anybody could succeed to it. Attah Ibrahim had better chances than most people in Ebiraland. He thus became the custodian of Ebira political institutions until he voluntarily resigned in 1954.

A young and energetic man, Attah Ibrahim was a devout muslim. He received his early Islamic education from Mallam Abdul Salami of Ilorin. He later proceeded to Bida for further Islamic studies.³⁹ He was knowledgeable and fluent in Hausa, Nupe, Arabic and could write some English. Between 1908 and 1911, he was in the company of some British political officers, among whom was captain F.F.W. Byng-Hall serving them loyally as an interpreter and a messenger. In 1917, he was the tax assessment scribe for Byng-Hall. Attah

Ibrahim served the colonial officers so loyally that Byng-Hall remarked that “I have found him of great use in dealing with the Ebira”.⁴⁰

However, in spite of all these qualities, Attah Ibrahim soon fell out with the British especially Sharwood Smith, the Governor of northern Nigeria, for his opposition to British rule as time went on. He was therefore seen by the authorities as biting the fingers that fed him. Unfortunately too, his people or subjects went against him as they clamoured for democratic rule and representation in the Ebira Native Authority where the Attah was the Sole Native Authority. It was this quests for democratic practice, as the wind of change was blowing, that swept off Attah Ibrahim from office, though he resigned voluntarily in 1954. Two years later in 1956, the Ebira Native Authority elected an ex-serviceman, Alhaji Mohammed Sani Omolori who had been in the forefront of the struggle against the Attah as the monarch of Ebiraland. He nevertheless took the title of Ohinoyi, the implication of which was that the monarch this time around was not an imposition and was subject to the will of the people.

Indeed, throughout the forty years of Alhaji Sani Omolori on the throne of Ebiraland as monarch, he did not possess the political weal of the late Attah Ibrahim. Whereas the Attah typified the example of a self-willed monarch, the Ohinoyi could not do anything without the consent of the Ebira Traditional Council until he died in 1996. There is no doubt therefore that throughout the forty years of Alhaji Sani Omolori on the throne (1956-1996), the Ebira Traditional Council dictated the pace and accounted for the relative peace in Ebiraland during his reign. His was the case of a ruler who was placed on the throne by his people and consequently ruled according to their desire.

After 1996 however, the relative peace witnessed during that era is no more. At the death of Sani Omolori in 1996, it was difficult for a successor to emerge. When at last one did emerge, it would appear that it went to the highest bidder: somebody who had regarded himself as ‘His Royal Highness’ even when an incumbent was on the throne. With the backing of the authorities that be, he succeeded in imposing him self on the Ebira in the same manner that the

British imposed the late Attah Ibrahim, his father on the Ebira then. Thus, since April, 1997, Alhaji Ado Ibrahim, a business tycoon had occupied the seat of the Ohonoyi of Ebiraland.

In the bid to resolve the institutional problem, the government of Kogi State did two things. First was that the monarchy will be rotated among the five major clans identified at the beginning of this study and secondly, that the title of the Ohinoyi be retained as the official title of the monarch and not that of the Attah, which the incumbent monarch would have very much loved to be associated with as his father was the first and only Attah⁴¹

As it is, for eighty years, the monarchy in Ebiraland with its attendant problems has come to stay. It would appear, however, that it was the reign of Attah Ibrahim(1917-1954) in spite of the criticisms against his person that accounts for the major infrastructural as well as educational developments of Ebiraland to which little may have been added since 1954. Such developmental projects embarked upon and completed during his reign include: the Okene Water Works, the Okene District Council, the Okene Central Mosque, construction of roads, the Okene Middle School, the Sudan Interior Mission Health Centre, the Okene post office among others.⁴²

From the foregoing, his reign witnessed pioneering activities in all areas of human endeavours. In fact, in the area of politics he was a dominant leadership figure as he was a thorn in the flesh of the British and the emirs of the House of Chiefs between 1947 and 1954.⁴³ He was responsible for consolidating the land that is Ebira today. Many years after his death, it has been argued that only very little has been added to the development of Ebiraland, while a great deal of the above highlighted infrastructure, particularly the Okene Water Works, has collapsed. However, the downward trend in development can be likened to the general malaise pervading the entire Nigerian nation in recent times.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the British indirect administration gave birth to the Monarchy in Ebiraland. The British succeeded in bringing together groups of non-centralised communities (clans) under a central leadership, now resident in Okene, which only comparatively sprang from Okengwe. Since 1917, Ebiraland has only seen the reign of three monarchs namely: the Attah Ibrahim (1917-1954), Sani Mohammed Omolori (1956-1996) and Alhaji Ado Ibrahim (from April 1997 to date). However, it is significant that British administration in Ebiraland is nothing short of a revolution. The revolution saw not only the emergence of a monarchical system of government, rather it brought an hitherto non-centralised societies under a common leader and hence got the people united under one central authority. Today, the Ebira could speak with one voice in spite of the various existing settlements into which they were grouped as clans in the pre-colonial era.

Notes

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4. Z.O. Apata, "Boundary Delimitation and the Merger of Ogori/Magongo With Igbira Division, 1918-1966: A study of the problems of changing Political and Cultural Identity" (M.A. Dissertation, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1978) P.14
5. Y.A. Ibrahim "Igbira Traditional Institutions" Unpublished Article (1974) P. 10.
6. Ibid. P. 10
7. Ibid. P. 11
8. H.A. Sani, op. cit P. 10
9. Y.A. Ibrahim, op. cit P. 12
10. Ibid P. 13
11. Ibid. P. 14
12. Ibid. P. 14
13. Ibid P. 14
14. Ibid. P. 14

15. Ibid. P. 15
16. This invasion is referred to as the Ajinomo war.
17. Y.A. Ibrahim, "The search for Leadership in a Nigerian Community. The Igbira Tao C1865-1954" (M.A. Dissertation, A.B.U. Zaria, 1968) p. 156.
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26. Ibid P. 102
27. O. Ikime, "Chief Dogho: The Lugardian System in Warri 1917-1932" in the Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria (J.H.S.N.), Vol. III, December, 1965 P. 313.
28. Ibid. P. 313.
29. N.A.K. D.O.O. File Wel/1936 Vol. 1 History of Igbira.
30. A.E. Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect rule in South eastern Nigeria, 1891-1929, (London, Longman, 1972).
31. Sir F.D. Lugard, "Report on the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria and Administration" in A.H.M. Kirk-Green (ed) Lugard and Amalgamation of Nigeria: A Documentary Record (Frank Cass, 1968) P. 49.
32. Y.A. Ibrahim, "The Search for Leadership in a Nigeria Community" Op. cit. P. 224.
33. N.A.I. CSO 26/2 File No. 12941 Kabba Province Annual Report 1923 PP. 12-15 N.A.K. Loko Prof. File 3647/1923 Igbira Division, creation of NAK S.N.P. 9 3647/1923 – Igbirra Division (Kabba Province) creation of
34. N.A.K. Loko Prof. File 3647/1923 Igbirra Division, creation of
35. N.A.K. S.N.P. 17/2/ File 10756 Vol. 1, Ethnographical Notes on the Tribes in Kabba province.
36. N.A.K. Loko Prof. File 128/1922, Kabba District Amalgamation of
37. Y.A. Ibrahim, The search for Leadership in a Nigerian community... op. cit P. 124.
38. Ibid. P. 124
39. N.A.K. Loko Prof. 28, Diary of Captain Byang-Hall, Resident, Kabba province, 1924.
40. Ibid.
41. Even now, the matter is yet to be resolved, as it remains one of the sources of tension between the monarchy and the people in Ebiraland.
42. These developmental projects were some of the achievements carried out during the thirty seven years' reign of Attah Ibrahim from 1917-1954.

43. The various debates in the sessions of the Northern Nigerian Legislative council and House of Chiefs between 1947-1954 showed that Attah Ibrahim was a fearless nationalist, for which he must have incurred the wrath of the British Administrators.