Indigenous Colonialism In Nigeria: A Case Study of Nupe Over-Rule in Okun Yoruba Land; North Central Nigeria, c.a. 1840-1897

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Abstract

Colonialism is both a political and an economic system, where a powerful state conquers or dominates a weaker one, using conquest as a weapon to achieve this. Colonialism or colonial system is a sort of hegemonial relation designed exclusively for political domination and economic exploitation of the colonized area. Colonialism equally assumes alien domination. It connotes the establishment and maintenance of an extended time to rule over an alien people that are separated from and subordinated to the ruling power. In this context therefore, a colonial relationship is created, when a nation establishes and maintains political and economic domination over a geographically external, and inhabited by people of any race at any state of cultural development. It is against this backdrop that this paper highlights the Nupe colonialism of Okunland of North Central Nigeria c.a. 1840-1897.

General Introduction

The Yoruba, who inhabit the present day southwestern part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, have diverse sub-cultural groups, such as the Ekiti, Oyo, Egba, Awori, Ibolo, Ijebu, Ijesha Ife, Akoko, Yewa and Okun Yoruba among others. Each of these groups has its own peculiar dialectical and sub-cultural traits. These traits make it possible to identify a given Yoruba individual an Oyo, Ijebu, Ekiti, Okun-Yoruba and so forth. For instance, based on a given Yoruba dialect spoken by a Yoruba person and or the facial
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As the person's sub-group becomes easily discernible.  

The Yoruba occupy two distinct geographical locations in Nigeria. More than 90% of them live in south-western Nigeria. The others less than 10% are located in the present day Kwara and Kogi States. It is out of the latter we have a group known as Okun-Yoruba. Some writers referred to them as North Eastern Yoruba groups. The people known today as Okun-Yoruba occupy a general area referred to during the colonial era, as Kabba Division in Kabba Province of the then, Northern region of Nigeria. Kabba province was one of the few provinces created by the British colonial government in 1900. It was “neither here, nor there”, when major tribal or ethnic classifications are made. As things stand today, very little is known about the pre-history of Okun land or indeed its ethnic history.

People are generally identified by their tongue. People display recognizable tongue as they emerged from the shadows of human existence into the limelight of history. Perhaps the first badge of identify of a people is their language. In this regard, it is important to note that according to linguistic studies the archetype of the Yoruba language was first spoken in the Niger-Benue confluence area. The only people who speak the Yoruba language and whose territories border on the Niger in that area, in recent historical times, are the Okun Yoruba speaking people. Thus, the Okun dialects of Owe, Gbede, Ijumu, Bunu, Yagba and Oworo, would appear to be the oldest dialects of the Yoruba language. However, like other aspects of Okun-Yoruba history, it is an area bristling with research possibilities for history scholars.

Field work experience by this writer indicates that the tradition of origin from Ile-Ife and Oyo-Ife are stressed by the Okun people, in order to emphasize their Yoruba identity. Admittedly, these traditions represent the painstaking efforts on the part of Okun people to provide answers to the
phenomenon of tradition of origin. This proves some sociological realism, though the evidence is unscientific and sometimes unreal, stemming from their own perception of themselves as one of the descendants of _Oduduwa_, the mythical figure father of the Yoruba race.

It has been argued in most quarters that non-observance or worship of some important Yoruba deities like _Obatala, Iyemoja, Orunmila_ among others, by Okun people seriously undermines the origin theory from Ile-Ife or Oyo, where these deities are worshiped. Despite this argument, the close affinity of the Okun people with the larger Yoruba group cannot be faulted. Professor I.A. Akinjogbin argues that:

> In any culture or civilization, language is basic and wherever you found a similar language being spoken, there is no doubt that there must be some historical connection. Therefore, wherever the Yoruba language or any of its dialect is spoken in west-Africa, we must assume that the area at one time or the other, formed part what can loosely be called Yoruba land.\(^4\)

It may be argued that not all places where the Yoruba language is spoken necessarily formed part of the Yoruba land. Howbeit, no one would probably deny that the people of Okun land are Yoruba.\(^5\)

Before discussing the advent of Nupe rule, its administrative pattern and the consequences of all these, it is pertinent to discuss the location of Nupeland (\textit{kin} Nupe as the locals call it) \textit{vis-a-vis} Okunland. \textit{Kin} Nupe lies within middle Niger Region, it extends from Niger-Benue Confluence at Lokoja in the south, to Timbuktu in the north.\(^6\) It should be pointed out that it was the proximity of \textit{kin} Nupe \textit{vis-à-vis} Okunland the engendered Nupe incursion, \textit{kin} Nupe lies in the middle Niger Region.\(^7\) \textit{Kin} Nupe’s territory had however not been static. There has been expansion of the area at
different times in its history. Thus, at different times, Kin Nupe expanded... towards the south-west where the Yoruba (Okun) constituted the neighbours.⁸

A very important socio-political development in Okunland before the British colonial rule was the Nupe conquest of the area. So penetrating was the weight of its impact that some British officers like C.K. Meek and H.B. James believed that the authentic history of the Okun people began with the advent of the Nupe ⁹. According to C.K. Meek:

...about raids from Bida and the iniquities of Nupe tax collectors, the Okun will talk ...... but events prior they prefer complete ignorance.¹⁰

Although, the significance of the Nupe raids and their activities in Okunland cannot be ignored, they were just an episode in the socio-political history of the people.¹¹ It was however a significant period, as it marked a turning point in its history.¹²

Nupe political hegemony over Okunland has been described by Manson, as”...an extension of the Islamic revolution started by Usman Dan Fodio in 1804.”¹³ However, by the time this Islamic revolutionary movement had spread across the river Niger to the south, it has lost its religious bearing. Accordingly, S.F. Nadel argued that the movement’s incursion into the south represented a new political and economic interest.

The south, which included Okunland was very rich in human and material resources and these may have been the main reasons why Kabba division (Okunland) was ravaged.¹⁴ Ade Obayemi equally commented that religion, the ostensible reason for the Jihad was never an issue. According to him, conversion of non-conversion to Islam played no part whatsoever in Okun-Bida relationship.¹⁵ Nupe’s imperialism and conquest of Okunland is very
significant for two major reasons. In the first place, the devastating raids that resulted in Nupe’s incursion in Okunland led to massive displacement of people, depopulation and the founding of new settlements like Igbagun and others.

Secondly the Nupe style of administration profoundly disrupted the indigenous administrative organization and patterns and also served as a precursor to the indigenous administrative re-organization imposed by the British colonial government.\textsuperscript{16} Infact, most of the reactions against the British administration and re-organization that followed cannot be understood without a re-examination and reference to the era of Nupe imperialism.

**The Nupe Conquest of Okunland.**

The Nupe invasion of Okunland was prompted primarily by internal conflict in *kin* Nupe. The internal conflict was occasioned by power tussle and rivalry between Nupe princes. The major contestants to the throne of *Etsu* Nupe were Usman Zaki Ibn Dendo whose mother was a Fulani. The second contestant was Muhammed Saba Ibn Dendo (better known as Masaba). The latter, whose mother was Nupe and had political tutelage training at the royal court of Majiya ii (the late *Etsu*) saw himself as a better candidate for the *Etsuship* than Usman zaki.\textsuperscript{17}

The struggle for power between the two, characterized Bida (the seat of power of Nupe kingdom) history in the first half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century with constant intrigues, wars, rivalries and rebellion.\textsuperscript{18} This bellicose situation forced Usman Zaki to seek political asylum in Yagbaland (a part of Okunland). Two factors combined to make the conquest of Okunland only a matter of time, One of this was geographical, because, Okunland was very close a proximity to Nupe land; and the other, the wealth of Okunland in human and material resources, which both warring parties needed to prosecute the war against each other. For instance, slaves were required to
replenish their armies and with which they exchanged for guns and ammunitions with slave dealers. It was against this backdrop that the conquest and political control of Okunland became part of the strategy of the warring parties.

But before the raids occurred, both Usman Zaki and Masaba had established the capitals at Rabah and Lade respectively. It is not however certain when the raids in Okunland actually started. However, the reigns of Usman Zaki, (1833-1859), Masaba (1859-1873) Umaru Majigi (1873-1882) etsu Maliki (1882-1894) and Etsu Abubakar (1894-1897), Nupe land witnessed one powerful ruler after another. Though their reigns were not free from occasional internal strife, they became the prime movers of events in Okunland, in the periods mentioned, as the Okun people experienced regular raids and incursions.19

As earlier discussed, by late 1834, Usman Zaki and Masaba had set their capitals at Rabah and Lade, respectively. The proximity of these power centre locations to Okunland facilitated its invasion and conquest by the Nupe forces. At around 1840, Etsu Usman Zaki had sent forces that overran Okun settlements of Egbe, Okeri, Ejiba and Ere all in West Yagba of Okunland. Between 1840-1850, Masaba attacked and conquered Kirri which was described as a “large and prosperous town” in Bunu.20 As a result of this development, many Kirri people fled to Oke Kirri (Kirri Mountains) to seek refuge where large rocks were rolled down on Nupe warriors. This method delayed, but could not permanently check Nupe advance. Kirri was conquered and many able bodied men were carried off as slaves. In addition, a tribute of 6,000 cowries was imposed on the people.21

Kabba, a principal town of Owe-Kabba people and the most prominent of the Okun settlements, was the next to be invaded. Kabba forces initially withstood the series of attacks from the Nupe forces due to its large
defensive walls (Odi) which surrounded the city. Lieutenant Cecil Forster Vandeleur, described the circumference of the Odi as extending over a mile from one side to the other. The war on Kabba locally referred to as Ogun Igberi (Igberi war) was very fierce and Kabba lost many men. Repeated Nupe cavalry charges forced the remaining Kabba defensive forces to withdraw inside the Odi. Unable to gain entrance, the Nupe warriors ravaged the country side with the objective of starving the people to death. The colonial report of 1932, confirms this perspective and states that:

The Nupe unable to take Kabba then a large walled town by assault, they harried the country side into submission.

After a protracted fight, a truce was made under which Kabba entered into a Peace Treaty (locally referred to as amana) with the Nupe authority. The Kabba people accepted to pay a tribute of 72,000 cowries. Significantly, the peace agreement by the Owe-Kabba with the Nupe authorities made her people stooges in the hands of the Nupe. As a result of this collaborating role played by Owe-Kabba, she enjoyed a relative peace and the support of the Nupe overlords. She however received the displeasure of her neighbouring communities particularly the Ijumu group.

Between 1860 and 1873, Masaba became the maximum and undisputed Etsu Nupe with his capital at Bida. With his strengthened position, Nupe attacks on Okunland in general became better planned, better coordinated, more frequent and more aggressive. During this period, the settlement of Egbe in West Yagba became a Nupe military camp in the area. From Egbe attacks were launched against the outlying territories. For instance, Muhmud Ibn Mohammad (a.k.a Yerima Muhmud), led a large army from Egbe to Ejuku in East Yagba. This area was invaded during the reign of Etsu Usman Zaki. But soon after his death, the people revolted and asserted their independence from Nupe rule. Muhmud’s expedition therefore was aimed at forcing them back to tributary system. By 1869, Gbede-Ijumu was
besieged. Places conquered in the area included Odda, Iluhagba, and Agrigbon: Odda was the most populous in Gbede, and its defeat lead to massive displacement of people. On a general note, Etsu Umaru Majigi was able to bring under the Nupe suzerainty virtually the entire Okunland before his death in 1882.

**Nupe Administration in Okunland**

Through conquest, Okunland became a “Nupe dependency”. One of the outcomes, the Okun people subservience to Nupe was the payment of annual tribute (Tokoshi) to Bida, the seat of Nupe’s power. The fulfillment of this obligation meant the establishment of an administrative control (based on the Ogba system), as a way of integrating the economy of Okunland with that of Bida on the basis of inequality. After the conquest of the entire Okunland by the Nupe forces, a pattern of administration was imposed. The administrative system or pattern was based on the Ogba system. The Ogba was similar to what the Yoruba called ajele, was the sole resident serving as a link between the Nupe potentates and the subjects. The Ogba wielded immense power with no advisory council nor any form of check on his power.

The delination of the dependency into fiefs for administrative ease, was done by the Etsu, a division which, in any case, did not conform to the indigenous pattern of administration. A fief for instance, could comprise of a number of autonomous scattered communities which hitherto had no tradition of political and administrative control or association before the Nupe era. Writing on the imposition of the Ogba on the Okun people, Ade Obayemi states that:

… the appointment of individuals to exercise responsibility beyond its own mini-states was an innovation in the political history of the Okun.
In the appointment of an Ogba, emphasis was not placed on the ethnic origin, but on the cooperation with and loyalty to the ruling power. Hence, an Ogba could be a freed slave or a loyal and cooperative olu ilu (local chiefs). In most cases, the relatives of the Nupe ruler and their allies were assigned fiefs. For instance, Etsu Masaba allotted fiefs principally to his relatives and allies. For an example, Oworoland was assigned to one Isa, who was the Lukpon of Bida and one of his son. Also his sister, Abiba Gogo was given Egga and parts of the northern section of Oworoland.

For the Ogba to successfully fulfill his or her primary assignment of tributes collection and to effectively fulfill this role, he or she had at his or her disposal a detachment of well-armed warriors. This detachment assisted the Ogba during tributes collection. The Ogba usually demonstrated a high degree commitment to this duty, since prompt payment of tribute served not only as a test of loyalty of the subjects, but also demonstrated the efficiency of the Ogba. The Ogba, who returned large tributes received Etsu’s award known as Tokoshi.

During the reign of Etsu Maliki (1884-1898), the Ogba’s excesses and Nupe’s rule generally reached a monumental level of absurdity. S.F. Nadel describes him as “… the wealthiest Etsu Nupe… but avaricious and cruel, under him, taxes reached an almost insufferable height”. During his reign, Okunland reached the nadir of its resources. When cowries and slaves were not readily available, forcibly the Ogba made the people pay their tributes with their children. According to Manson;

“… the levy of tax on the Yoruba (Okun) subjects increased appreciably. As it became more difficult to pay in produce or kind… slaves and children were rendered to Ogba or seized by the Ogbas”.

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Another striking feature of Nupe administration in Okunland was the strengthening of the powers of loyal indigenous rulers. In Oworoland for instance, red cap chiefs like Abba, Ajeto and Ajokpa became faithful allies of Nupe government. As a result of this, their powers and authority were extended to cover the entire Oworo land. But where leaders proved uncooperative, they were reduced to insignificance. For example, the Ayere leaders, namely Ogeigei, Olukeu, Ekundima and Olumodeji were all hostile to Nupe administration. In return they were reduced to “nonentities”, as they were given no part to play under Nupe administration.

It was in Kabba, the headquarters of Okunland that the policy of using local rulers in the administration proved most successful. Here, successive Obaro (the paramount ruler of Owe-Kabba) in the periods between 1860-1897, namely Obaro Mokelu, Obaro Ajinuhi, and Obaro Gbayero Ajibohokun were all loyal to the Nupe cause and authority. The powers of the Obaro, in particular, that of Obaro Gbaiyero Ajibohokun (1888-1923) were extended by the Nupe authority beyond his traditionally prescribed areas of jurisdiction, to cover non-Owe-Kabba groups of Ayere, Ogidi, Ufe, Aduge and Gbede.

The Obaro became a sort of paramount ruler and the supervision of tributes collection from these areas became his responsibility. This exalted position to which the Obaro was elevated to during the Nupe era, radically transformed his traditional role, which hitherto had been limited to Owe-Kabba localities. The non-Owe grouped who are now under the Obaro’s control resented their subordinate status. They accused the Obaro of Kabba of betraying them to the Nupe. As a result, they formed between 1891 and 1897 an alliance with the sole objective of throwing off both the Nupe and Obaro’s yolk. In all, by 1897, the Ogidi Grand Alliance with the assistance of the forces of the Royal Niger Company finally flushed out the Nupe out of Okunland. Bida fell to the RNC forces on 5th February, 1897. A treaty
was concluded on 6th February, 1897 which terminated Nupe administration and proclaimed the “freedom” of the subject people.

Obayemi summed up the situation of Okunland before 1900 thus:

European and literate African visitors to Okunland in the 19th century give us the grim picture of the situation of these people …economically despoiled, political humiliated, their homeland depopulated and their social and political institutions considerably dislocated.38

Conclusion
From the foregoings therefore, one thing readily comes to our minds; and that is, colonialism in whatever form is not colour-based. As we can see for instance, the experience of British colonialism in Nigeria, we also had indigenous colonialism too, as demonstrated by our discussion so far. Colonialism generally has common denominators all over the world and wherever it happened. In the first place, colonialism is all about territorial expansion with the sole aim of the exploitation of human and natural resources of the colonized, this we have demonstrated. Also we have argued that colonialism employed a good measure of coercion which was experienced but the people of Okunland in the hands of the Nupe oppressors. Under such condition, Nupe colonial administrations haunted, as they often were, by a sense of insecurity operated on a model of a ‘police state’ in the maintenance of law and order in situation of revolt which frequently took place against the Nupe colonial establishment. On a final note, Nupe colonialism of Okunland as it lasted had no positive intents toward the land and people right from the beginning. It was a mission undertaken with the sole purpose of extending and consolidating her interest only. On the whole, the Nupe era to a very large extent crippled,
undermined and derailed the indigenous socio-political set-up and generally retarded the economic development of Okunland.

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