

# Colonialism and the changing nature of indigenous political organisations: The Okun-Yoruba and the Igbo in comparative perspectives

Ranti Matthew **Ojo**

Department of History/International Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

## Abstract

The study carries out a comparative analysis of the nature and characters of indigenous politics and leadership among the Okun-Yoruba and the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. The paper extends the analysis to the changing nature of the political organisation of both societies as a result of external influence. For the Okun-Yoruba, the paper explores the political organisations and nature of intergroup relations before the Nupe invasion in the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent imposition of British colonial rule in Nigeria around 1900. The indigenous political organisation of the Igbo is subjected to a comparative analysis with the Okun-Yoruba. The study also examines the impact of British colonialism on both the Igbo and Okun-Yoruba. It is noted that both the Okun and Igbo societies shared similar indigenous political and social structures that were characterised by small-scale political units. These colonial arrangements had far-reaching consequences on inter-group relations as well as the political organisation of both Okunland and Igboland. British colonial arrangement applied a new system of administration that was fashioned in line with the indirect rule system which was antithetical to the pre-colonial situation. The British imperialism in Nigeria did not only alter the political landscape but they also changed the nature of intergroup relations for both Okun Yoruba and the Igbo.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Okun-Yoruba, Igbo, Indigenous Politics, Nupe, Islam, Christianity

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors that led to the transformation of the indigenous political system of Okun-Yoruba focusing on the Nupe invasion of the region in the late eighteenth century and subsequent British colonialism of Nigerian societies from the late nineteenth century. Also, the paper will draw comparisons with the Igbo region that shares similar indigenous political systems and structures. Such a comparative perspective reveals similarities and differences regarding how indigenous societies adapted to external influences.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked a turning point in the history of the Niger-Benue confluence peoples including the Okun people. It was a period of significant demographic changes, the introduction of the slave mode of production at the domestic level, imperial expansion, rivalry among princes and politics, new alliances and conflicts, and the development of the commercial frontiers (Mailafiya, 2005). Thus, the history of Okun people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was characterised by external influences. The most fundamental of these external influences were the Nupe invasion and British colonisation in the nineteenth century. The Nupe military adventures in Okunland had a tremendous impact on the socio-political and economic life of the Okun people. In the first place, the imposition of

the Nupe rule on Okunland and its attendant socio-political and economic changes affected the nature of the indigenous political organisation and intergroup relations among the autochthonous Okun groups. Secondly, the advent of colonialism and British colonial administrative reorganisation also impacted the dynamics of group contacts and interactions among the Okun people, thereby prompting the changing nature of the indigenous political organisation of the Okun-Yoruba.

Likewise, in the Igboland the changes that have been occurring since the genesis of British imperialism gained greater momentum after the Aro Expedition (1901–1902), when the colonial frontier expanded to encompass the entire south eastern Nigeria. The period 1890–1918 witnessed the establishment of British authority in Igbo towns on the Lower Imo River after the banishment of Jaja of Opobo, the annexation and administration of the entire Igboland and other events that followed until the end of the First World War (1914–1918). Then the period after independence deals with the sequence of events that led to the Igbo Women's War (1929), and the political administrative changes of the British colonial rule in Igboland that necessitated the changing nature of the indigenous political organisation of Igboland.

Okun Yoruba is a dialectical group of the Yoruba who inhabit the north-central zone of modern Nigeria lying within Latitude 7° 30'N

and 8° 33'N and Longitude 5° 15'E and 6° 30'E (Bakinde,2014). The Okun Yoruba speak closely related Yoruba dialects commonly understood by all Yoruba people except some Yagba intonations and expressions as well as Ayere and Aduge of the Ijumu group. It comprises the Bunu, Ijumu, Owe (Kabba), Oworo, and Yagba groups that presently occupy Ijumu, Kabba/Bunu, Mopamuro, Yagba East, and Yagba West Local Government Areas, as well as the western part of Lokoja Local Government Area in the western senatorial district of Kogi State

The traditions of origin of the Okun-Yoruba groups have been a contentious issue not only among scholars; but also within the autochthonous communities in Okun Yorubaland. There are two angles or theories to this dispute, namely: the autochthonous (indigenous) theory and the migratory theory. The autochthonous theory states that the Niger-Benue confluence where Okun-Yoruba belongs did not originate from outside of the region, instead, it emerged from along the Niger-Benue trough. The migratory theory of origin opines that the Okun-Yoruba people originated from either Oyo-Ile or Ile-Ife in the Southwest of Nigeria (Iyekolo 2014), though the exact time of migration to the present location from the aboriginal home remains unknown. This theory, however, remains the most popular among the Okun communities owing to socio-cultural affinities with the Yoruba of the Southwest Region of Nigeria.

Like the Okun, the origin of the Igbo-speaking people has drawn much scholarly attention. As A. E. Afigbo notes, the origin of the Igbo remains a contested theme in Igbo studies because not much is known about the early history of the Igbo. According to Afigbo (Afigbo, 1987):

the problem of Igbo origins is indeed "a very maze within a maze" it boggles the mind. Instead of one pan-Igbo tradition of origin, there are almost as many traditions as there are those independent sub-cultural groups referred to as "clans in the intelligent reports of the 1930s. In fact, in some clans, there are two rival traditions of origin.

The major schools of thought on Igbo origin as enumerated by A. E. Afigbo, Elizabeth Isichei, Okoro Ijoma etc. include the oriental hypothesis, the Niger/Benue confluence theory, and the autochthony theory. The socio-political organisation of the Okun-Yoruba people was essentially decentralised; each of the Okun communities was autonomous and self-governing. Despite being a Yoruba stock, the dynastic kingdom type which characterised the socio-political structure of Central Yorubaland, was completely absent in the Northeast Yorubaland. As Akinwumi (2011) remarked, Okun did not evolve into any centralised state with all the trappings of monarchy; and indeed, all the communities were independent of one another and so jealously guarded their independence. The structural

organisation of the indigenous political system of Okun society comprises the family/village administration, chieftaincy institution, and age grade system.

The indigenous socio-political system in Okunland was basically decentralised and conciliar in nature in which each village or community was governed by a council of elders. The basic socio-political unit was the *Idile* (family unit) headed by the *Bale*. These closely related family units are usually assembled in a spatially defined area or established new settlements. The physical separation could not break the family ties. The members of the same lineage saw themselves as *ebi* (extended family) or descendants of the same ancestral family which is headed by the *Oloriebi* (Family Head). A group of families which claimed the same magnetic descent constituted the *aku* (clan). Two or more *aku* formed the *adugbo* (quarter). Usually, the oldest member of the most senior lineage became *Oloriadugbo* (head of quarter) where a group of related lineages merged to form an enlarged community. The eldest was selected as the *Oloriilu* (Community head). The *Olori* was not an autocrat, neither was he seen as a paramount ruler. Commenting on this set-up in Okunland, Obayemi (1988) affirmed that what we have is not a kingdom but a State; a political community whose members belong together by mutual agreement and not by conquest.

The Okun traditional political structure was rooted in the chieftaincy institutions and age-grade system which formed important organs in the administrative machinery of Okunland. The Pre-Nupe era Okun political structure was based on a triadic politico-ritual pattern made up of a title system which Ade Obayemi called *Aro ate* (*Obaro-ate*) or *Oluate* (cp *emirate, caliphate, sultanate, Onuate, Alafinate*, etc) in which all *Okun* or *Oyi* (Owe-Kabba, Ijumu, Yagba, Abinu, Oworo etc) can be classified. Most of the Okun communities were made up of three groups namely: *Ona/Arin* (way/middle), *Otun* (right) and *Ohi* (left). But in Oweland (Kabba) where the system was developed, they are *Katu*, *Kabba*, and *Odolu*. It is equally important to state that the titles are also grouped into three hierarchical traditional political systems controlled by a three-tiered body of traditional chiefs, namely: a three-titled chief called *Ololu*, the double-titled chief called *Orota*, and a single-titled chief called *Igemo*. Both *Aroate* and *Oluate* are by their nature, a federation or confederation based on the triadic principle of collectivism headed by *Ona-Otun-Ohi* (*Katu-Kabba-Odolu*). This principle is centuries-old results and conclusions of the indigenous experiments at the resolutions of conflict by indigenous patrilineal clans. Therefore, Obayemi posits that the *Aroate* or *Oluate* concept of state rests on the principle of collective sovereignty of the patrilineal clans of each Okun community.

Age grades, known as *Ote* or *Egbe* among Okun with slight variations in classification, featured prominently in the indigenous political administration of Okun society. Therefore, in the ancient traditional administrative structure of the Okun people, the age grade system formed the bedrock of the Okun traditional political system through which the youths were introduced to the norms and laws of the society. Olubiyo stressed that Okun as exemplified by the Kabba people possessed a unique and highly developed age grade and chieftaincy system worthy of admiration by their descendants and the colonial masters (Olubiyo, 2006). This institution was reinforced by a common allegiance to the group shrines and cults.

It was, however, in Owe that centralised authority had reached an advanced stage before the coming of the Nupe and the British. Elsewhere in Ijumu and Bunu, except Kiri in northern Bunu, there was a less advanced stage of traditional authority and the political arrangement was more fluid and segmented. Owe (Kabba) had a hierarchical traditional political system controlled by a three-tiered body of traditional chiefs in the pre-Nupe colonial era. This basic difference in the political system in Owe and those of other Okun groups was to influence the course of political development in the area. At the apex of the Owe age-grade system is the *Ololu* grade composed of three Monarchs namely *Obaro*, *Obadofin* and *Obajemu* who were the three supreme title holders under whose collective leadership, communal peace

and concord had been ensured before the advent of Nupe and Western Colonialism. Though they were not paramount rulers, they with their Chiefs-in-Council (*Nko*), constituted the highest authority in Kabbaland in all matters including maintenance of law and order, spiritual matters and issues relating to war, etc. They could also delegate powers to any group or individuals in the interest of Kabbaland (P. O. Olupehin, personal communication, October 1, 2016).

The next in the hierarchy was the *Orota*, consisting of two-titled chiefs who acted as advisers to the *Ololu* on administrative matters. The *Orota* was responsible for the day-to-day running of affairs of his clan, organising clan meetings, farmland, and domestic problems. Next in the structure was the *Igemo* made up of one-title chief mainly responsible for executing the decisions and policies of the *Ololu* on administrative matters. The *Igemo* also helped to collect dues or levies from age-grades and clans for communal rituals.

However, the last group in the Kabba pre-colonial power structure was *Gbarufu-Moso* made up of the non-titled masses that could belong to either *Omeko* or *Olusele* grade. This *Gbarufu-Moso* group provided the labour force for the communal projects, of which the *Olusele* grade of the *Gbarufu-Moso* executed the bulk of the manual work while the *Omeko* performed the supervisory role (Okemeta, 1986). Indeed, as Akinwumi

pointed out, the purpose of the *Olusele* group was to give the members sound training and orientation in society so that they would be useful in the future. Thus, in the traditional administrative structure of Okunland as exemplified by Kabba group prior to the Nupe invasion and subsequent establishment of British rule in Okunland, there existed a power chain which ensured the upward passage of advice, requests or proposals from the recognised age grades and clans through the *Gbarufu-Moso*, *Igemo* and *Orota* to the *Ololu* and the corresponding downward flow of decisions, policies or information through the same groups (Akinwumi, 2011). The age-grade in Okunland was patriarchal because it applied to the males alone and one of the leading reasons for constituting these young boys into an age group was to enlist them for proper training and orientation, so as to make them useful citizens as they advanced in age. Indeed, the age-grade system was the instrument through which the youth in Okunland were introduced to the norms and laws of society.

It should be noted that the power chain or structure in Kabba land was segmented into age grades, and it was religiously maintained until the advent of Nupe imperialism which disrupted the traditional administrative structure in Kabbaland. Hitherto, the age-grades system cumulated into the chieftaincy system symbolised the stratification of the society. In the age-group system, two categories of people emerged, namely the title holders and non-title holders. The

titleholders are *Ololu* (three titleholders), *Orota* (two titleholders), and *Igemo* (one title holder) while the non-title holders known as the *Gbarufu-moso* were divided into *Omeko* and *Olusele* in order of seniority. The first two grades (*Olusele* and *Omeko*) are somehow natural and automatic since they operate on the basis of birth, while the remaining three (*Igemo*, *Orota* and *Ololu*) are never automatic simply because they are subjected to certain prerequisites.

Notably, all the grades are opened to every male indigenous person of Okunland. The age-grade institution in Okunland cut across families or lineages. Research findings from some British administrators such as A. G. Harris, Captain B. L. A. Kenneth, C. K. Meek, H. S. Bridal, H. B. James and Captain A. H. D. Paul on the age grade system in Northeast Yorubaland, revealed its ceremonial roles (NAK; SNP K 2766/1924). For instance, C. K. Meek in his *Historical and Ethnological Notes on the History of Kabba* (Owe) identified seven (7) grading steps in the Owe Age Grade System in ascending order from *Olusele*, *Omeko*, *Gemo*, *Orota*, *Obajemu*, *Obadofin* and *Obaro*. He noted that the third step marked with 'taking of traditional title' is when a man remains in *Omeko* grade until he is ready to take the title and move into the next grade. Getting removed from the *Omeko* grade thus means a social step (NAK, Kabba, DIV, 1/3/1). In addition, C. K. Meek remarked that "The 5th Grade: *Obajemu*, the 6th Grade: *Obadofin* and the 7th Grade: *Obaro* are titles conferred by the popular choice of all the

Orota of Owe and the titles remain with the persons who it is conferred on throughout their lifetime. And of these three titles, Obaro is the highest in Owe and rotates among the Mokelu, Odudu (Ajinuhi) and Ajibohokun ruling Houses".

C.K Meek's study further revealed that the Owe Age Grade System and Yagba Age Grade System in Okunland consist of four steps. While Owe (Kabba) had Gbarufu-moso, Igemo, Orota and Ololu, the Yagba had Omodi, Omodi-Jagun, Ogun and Gomma or Ijoye. According to B. O. Omotosho (2016):

Owe age grade system has four steps, which include both non-title and title grades. At the apex of the Owe age grade system is the *Ololu* grade which is composed of *Obaro*, *Obadofin* and *Obajemu* – the three supreme titleholders under whose collective leadership, communal peace and concord had been ensured in the pre-Nupe and pre-British days. Under the *Ololu* grade are three others: *Orota*, *Igemo* and *Gbarufu-Moso* in hierarchy or descending order of seniority and importance. However, the last (*Gbarufu-Moso*) were made up of *Omeko* and *Olusele* also in descending order of seniority. Most importantly no traditional title in Owe culture is in exclusive preservation of any family that is indigenous to Owe-Kabba. (B O. Omotosho, personal communication, July 27, 2016).

However, these age grades according to oral sources, constituted the labour force of the community to the extent that these groups,

particularly the *Omeko* collectively across lineages, engaged in public works like the repair of roads and bridges, or clearing of new sites of development or establishments and defence of the community against external aggressions. *Omeko* were organised according to their clans with each clan having an *Omeko* leader but collectively performing their communal function, thereby building relationships across their immediate clans. In addition, members of age-grades, especially the *Olusele*, participated actively in an annual event called *Opelu* which aimed at protecting and projecting public morality (O. Tolorunshagba, personal communication, October 10, /2016).

There seemed also to be a gender dimension to the political organisation. This reveals the role of women in the political process and the administration of Oweland. Akinwumi (2011) noted that women were not left out in the administration of Okunland. Among the Bunu, Ijumu and Owe, they were organised into cults like *Imole* and *Ofosi* through which their views on any issues especially those that touched on rituals were articulated. Also, through these cults, the women were organised to play specific roles in society (Akinwumi). Indeed, the indigenous socio-political system in this region was basically decentralised and conciliar in nature. The idea of using a single chieftain over the entire region was anathematic (Apata, 2003). A possible exception was the Owe people in Kabba where *Obaro* was

generally recognised as the overall ruler. Elsewhere in the Northeast Yorubaland, each village or community was governed by a council of elders. This was variously described as *Orotita*, *Opajegbo*, *Oludoi*, *Uewa*, *Olukoi* and *Olukoko* (Apata). Conversely, the similarities in language, customs, economic activities and political experiences have brought the various Okun groups into closer interaction with one another. There is a linguistic affinity even though they speak different dialects of the Yoruba language. Equally, age grades, with slight variations in classification, formed the basis of the indigenous social interactions among the various Okun groups. These age grades also featured prominently in the indigenous political arrangements of the people.

Traditional judicial systems among African communities have received attention from scholars. Olusanya Faboyede posits that:

To provide good government in the African communities, the Kings' decision was final; however, many times, the traditional rulers considers the consent of their chiefs in some fundamental issues such as decision on arsonist or rapists in their domains. In such circumstances, no king ruled without taking into consideration the advice of his chiefs and elders in council. Examining such devolution of power, the chiefs at the lower chamber formulated local laws that could prevent theft

and violence in Akoko society, while criminal cases and heinous offences such as murders, arson, and rape, among others, were carefully handled by the kings to avoid sceptics. Thus, the administration of justice depends on the gravity of the offences. The palace court headed by the traditional ruler serves as the highest Court of Appeal (Faboyede, 2013).

The focus on the administration of law is important in order to assess the continuity and change of the Okun after their encounter with Nupe and the British colonial administration. Archival records show that the Okun people have a mechanism for dealing with offences in the precolonial Okun society. For instance, H. B. James notes on marriage customs in the Ife Olukotun area thus:

On divorce and adultery, should a husband hear that his wife has a clandestine lover, he will take the matter to the elders. The offender is warned by the elders and ordered to pay a fine of kolas or perhaps money which will be divided out amongst them. If the lover still pays his attention to the wife and the matter is brought to the elders of the tribe, the fine payable will be increased and if the offender cannot pay it, the chief of his town must pay it for him. Subsequent offences are not likely to



occur as the offender, if the chief of his town has paid his fine for him, has to work on the chief's farm to wipe off the debt and he does not want to tie himself down indefinitely by having fines heaped up against him. While the woman offending is punished by having her cloth taken from her, torn, and put in the house of ETU [...]. (NAK Loko Prof 507/1914, "Yagba District Assessment Report", 1914).

The Judicial system of the Okun people in the pre-colonial era was an integral part of the political organisation of the Okun people. The administration of justice in Okunland before the Nupe invasion in the 1840s and the European colonisation thereafter was decentralised ranging from *Idile* (family) court sitting through the *Obaladugbo* (ward head), village court and then ended up in *Nko* (Oba Court). The *Idile* as the basic socio-political unit served as the court of first instance where intra-family quarrels and other petty issues were resolved under the *OloriEbi* (*Bale*) who served as the judge while serious cases especially those that involved different families within the same quarter went to the court of *Obaladugbo* for adjudication. However, cases that involved murder, arson, abduction and destruction of economic trees were heard by *Nko* which is the highest Judicial Tribunal in Okunland. The system is based on the immutable law of the

land usually referred to as "*a daiyeba*" (Apata, 2011).

The Oba's court (*Nko*) is presided over by an *Ololu* where the *Ololu* and Senior *Orotas* sit in council. The decisions arrived at were executed by the age group; for instance, *Omeke* (*GbarufuMoso*) in Oweland (Kabba) acted as the policemen while the *Igemo* (one titled chiefs monitor the proceedings and also ensured that proper execution of the decisions of the tribunal/court are carried out. Apata stressed that age-grade had established machinery for dealing with its erring members. Cases of misconduct were reported to the group leaders who acted as the sole judge. By this means, discipline was maintained, and members were to conform to the rules and regulations of the group in particular and society in general (Ibid).

The judicial system in Okunland could be said to be the responsibility of the entire community. The apparatus for justice administration was community-based because institutions such as the chieftaincy system, age grade system, cult system, and social events (called *Opelu*), were employed to ensure that justice, discipline and public morality were instilled in Okun society.

### **Nupe administration in Okunland**

Nupe's rule over Okunland led to major socio-political and economic changes that transformed the existing political structures and social institutions of the Okun people. The Nupe military adventures into Okunland had a significant impact on the socio-

political and economic life of the Okun people. The paper argues that the Nupe invasion of Okunland was predicated on the socio-economic and political exigencies in Nupeland rather than the philosophical ideology of the propagation of Islam that influenced the Fulani jihad in Hausaland. The Nupe war which was popularly referred to as the '*Ogun Anupe*' among the people of Owe, Oworo, Bunu and Ijumu and as *Ibon* in Yagbaland brought the Nupe conquest of the area under study with two-fold significance. First, the devastating nature of the Nupe conquest substantially altered the old order. It led to massive displacement of the population and the founding of new settlements. Secondly, the Nupe style of administration profoundly disrupted the indigenous administrative patterns and served as a precursor to the twentieth-century administrative reorganisation imposed by the British colonial government (Ibid, 19).

This paper aligns with scholars like S.F. Nadal, (1942) Ade Obayemi, (1978) Z.O. Apata, (1990) Olayemi Akinwumi (2007) who disregard religion as an underlying reason for the invasion by the Nupe because the impetus of religious zeal which drove the Fulani armies across Northern Nigeria was already spent when the Nupe rulers and the Fulani leaders turned their faces southward. In addition, none of the centres of Nupe attacks in Okunland was Islamised. Harunah (2011) stressed that the campaigns of the late 1850s and 1860s were aimed at

both the production of slaves and the establishment of the Bida administration over the Okun Yoruba communities. This paper posits that Nupe rule and administrative institutions established after their invasion undermined the indigenous socio-political structure.

As earlier mentioned, "the dynamics of socio-political and economic relationships in the region were transformed due to the Nupe imperial expansion and development of commercial frontiers." (D. Olabode, personal communication, January 15, 2020).

After the conquest of the entire Okunland by the Nupe forces, a new pattern of administration was imposed. The administrative system or pattern was based on the *Ogba* system. The *Ogba*, 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 or any form of check on his power. Thus, Okunland became "Nupe dependency." The effect was that the Okun people became subservient to Nupe with the payment of annual tribute (Tokoshi) to Bida, the seat of Nupe's power. The fulfilment of this obligation meant the establishment of administrative control (based on the *Ogba* system), as a way of integrating the economy of Okunland with that of Bida based on inequality. The *Ogba* system was a way of integrating the economy through the appointment of an individual as a sole

representative of Etsu (King) of the Nupe Kingdom whose responsibility was to serve as a link between the Nupe potentates and the subjects, especially in the collection of taxes and tributes. This defeat marked the beginning of the long Nupe exploitation of the Okun people through heavy taxes and levies by adopting the *Ogba* system (NAK, Kabba District, 1/3/4). It is imperative to state that despite the remarkable degree of resistance put forward against the various Nupe raids by OkunYoruba communities, they were all subjugated because Nupe had superior weapons and the Okun lacked a united force that could battle Nupe.

The delineation of the dependency into fiefs for administrative ease was done by the Etsu, a division that, in any case, did not conform to the indigenous pattern of administration. A fief, for instance, could comprise a number of scattered autonomous 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, Obayemi (1978:64) 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 ethnic origin, but on cooperation with, and loyalty to the ruling power. Hence, an *Ogba* could be a freed slave or a loyal and cooperative *oluilu* (local chief). 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 example, Oworoland was assigned to one Isa who was the Lukpon of Bida and one of his sons. Also, his sister, Abiba Gogo, was given Egga and parts of the northern section of Oworoland (Obayemi, 1977). For the *Ogba* to successfully fulfill his or her primary assignment of tribute collection and to effectively fulfill this role, he or she had at his/her disposal, a detachment of well-armed warriors. This detachment assisted the *Ogba* during tribute collection. The *Ogba* usually demonstrated a high degree of 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 reward 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. Nadel (1942:71-78) described 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 (1970:195-198) "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." There were socio-economic consequences of this *Ogba* system which manifested in the collaboration of some village chiefs with the *Ogba*. The *Ogba* extorted higher taxes from the people by inflating demands from Bida. The excess tax collected was shared between the resident *Ogba* and the local dignitaries headed by the Oba or Olu thus, compromising their people's happiness and security. Secondly, the arbitrary grouping of many villages under an *Ogba* made the village head of where the *Ogba* was resident feel more important than the other village-heads, and claim lordship, thereby resulting in resentment among Okun people (NAK, Kabba Dist. 1/3/1).

Oral and documentary evidence claim that some Okun people constituted a substantial unit of the Nupe army that invaded Okunland. Obaweda Tolorunshagba affirmed that the Owe-Kabba warriors "collaborated with the Nupe forces for the invasion and eventual subjugation of the Owe neighbours like Ayere, Ogidi, Ikoyi, Iffe and Ekinrin" (O. Tolorunshagba, personal communication, October 10, 2016). This claim led Chief Samuel Olobatoko, one-time National President of Kabba Development Union, in his presidential address during the 2012 Kabba Day Celebration, to publicly apologise to the entire Owe-Kabba apologise for whatever 'perceived sins' that might have been committed against them by the Owe-Kabba people in the time past (Olobatoko, 2012). It was revealed that "Oweland was

besieged and taken over by the Nupe. Consequent on this defeat, the Owe, especially the political leaders began to collaborate with the Nupe. Obaro Gbayero Ajibohokun, (c. 1882-1923) more than any of his predecessors, supported the Nupe military against the Ijumu (Akinwumi, 1999: 26). It is important to note that the Okun people also collaborated with the Nupe in their raids for the conquest of Okunland thereby making the Okun lose their independence and distorting cordial intergroup relations among the Okun ethnic nationalities.

Besides the appointment of *Ogba*, Bida also adopted another method in administering the Northeast Yoruba dependency by building up the power of any loyal indigenous ruler. In Oworo, red cap chiefs like Abba, Ajeto, and Ajokpa became faithful allies of the Nupe government, hence their power 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, Ekundina and Olumodeji were all hostile to the Nupe administration. In return, they were reduced to "nonentities", as they were given no part to play under the Nupe administration (Apata, 2003). 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 and 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, those of Obaro Gbayero 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 Gbedde (Apata, 41). For example, the Ayere leaders Ogeidei, Olukeu, Ekundina I and Olumodeji I, were very hostile to the Nupe administration. Consequently, they were given no part to play under Nupe's rule. It was in Owe land that the policy of using the local ruler in the administration proved most successful. The power and authority of *Obaro* were extended over the non-Owe groups of Ayere, Ogidi, Gbede, Yagba and Akoko thereby making the Obaro a paramount ruler.

In compensation for his collaboration, Obaro was made paramount ruler over the Ijumu, Bunu, and Akoko. It was described as "an innovation in Okun political history." (Akinwumi, 2007: 88). Apata (2011:41-42) remarked that:

Obaro Gbayero Ajibohokun ensured that the Nupe were given every support. His long reign 1888-1923 helped to stabilize the Nupe administration in Oweland. He also tied the Ilajo clan to the apron string of the Nupe government. During his reign, the Owe warriors constituted a significant unit in the Nupe army and

actively assisted the Nupe to conquer the Owe neighbours of Ayere, Olle, Odo-Ape, Gbede- Ijumu, Iffe (Ufe) and Ekinrin-Adde. Kabba town thus became a springboard from where the outlying territories were progressively brought under Nupe administration. It revealed that the people benefitted from collaboration with the Nupe. The people "supported and assisted the Nupe and prospered in so doing. For collaborating, no Nupe 'Ogba' was stationed at Kabba; the power and authority of Obaro were extended over the non-Owe groups of Ayere, Ogidi, Gbede, Yagba and Akoko. He was regarded as the paramount ruler, and the supervision of tribute collection from these areas became his responsibility. The exalted position, which the Obaro occupied during the Nupe era, was at variance with his traditional role. Therefore, under the Nupe rule the traditional role of Obaro was radically transformed. Nearly three-quarters Northeast Yoruba area was placed under his jurisdiction. (p. 41-42)

Suffice it to state that the underlying objective of Nupe was to impose the Bida Emirate System on the entire Northeast Yoruba region. However, 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

during the Nupe era, radically transformed his traditional role, which hitherto had been limited to Owe- Kabba localities. In the Owe indigenous socio-political setting, the *Obaro* was acknowledged as the head of the Owe ethnic group. His authority was hardly felt outside this group. Within Owe, his exercise of power was circumscribed by the other two powerful *Ololus* (*Obadofin and Obajemu*). Therefore, under Nupe's rule, the traditional role of *Obaro* was radically transformed. Nearly three-quarters of Northeast Yorubaland was placed under his jurisdiction, and this became the turning point in the intergroup relations among the Okun people whereby the relations became characterised by suspicion, acrimony and protest. Thus, the attempt to impose the Bida emirate system on Northeast Yorubaland failed because it was greeted by many reactions and oppositions. This was the political situation in Okunland when British officials penetrated the hinterland of what is now known as Nigeria. An interviewee asserts that:

the combination of the size of Kabba town and the sophistication of the political system that sustained it must have been the factors that made the Nupe to decide to make Kabba town its base from where raids were organized to neighboring towns and villages and consequently, people captured as Slaves from such raids were also brought to Kabba town before they were taken to Bida (J. O. Dada, personal communication,

July15, 2020).

Concomitantly, evidence from the Oral Traditions has it that the choice of Owe (Kabba) as the base of Nupe administration by the Nupe Overlords was based on the fact that Owe (Kabba) was the most advanced political Okun group owing to her age grade system and the defensive mechanism of the highly fortified and walled town of Kabba. The non-Owe groups who were placed 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 (RNC), finally flushed 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's administration and proclaimed the "freedom" of the subject people.

By 1894, Owe's neighbours, who could no longer bear the hardship from Nupe decided to team up under what they called 'the Ogidi Grand Alliance' to face Nupe and their Owe collaborators. Not only did they procure weapons through their sources in Lagos and Ekiti, but they were also able to get in touch with the Church Missionary Society and the Royal Niger Company (RNC), through whom the decision to terminate Nupe overlordship

in the area was taken by RNC in 1897. However, in 1894, Bishop Herbert Tugwell in the company of Bishop Charles Philips and Rev. C. S. Wating of Church Missionary Society (CMS) traversed Bunu, Kabba and Ayere on their way to Ibadan from Lokoja and observed that the inhabitants of these towns were cruelly oppressed by the Nupe and their home country was untilled while their farms and houses laid amid rocks (Apata, 46). Thus, Bishop Herbert Tugwell and Captain Henry Bowers' report stirred British Foreign and Colonial Officers into action in which Royal Niger Company commissioned Fredrick Lugard to undertake a fact-finding tour of Northeast Yorubaland in 1894. The findings of this tour confirmed the persistent complaints of the people about Nupe's ruthless administration and Nupe's blockade of trade, thereby making British expedition on Nupe Kingdom and its Northeast Yorubaland inevitable (Perham & Bull, 1976, 284).

The first military expedition as it was recorded by Seymour Vandeleur was launched by Royal Niger Company troops led by George Tubman Goldie on Nupe Camp at Kabba market on 14th January 1897. But before the arrival of the Royal Niger Company troops, the Obaro Ajibohokun got the wind of the advancing forces, and he relayed the news with despatch to Makun, and the Makun fled with the entire Nupe forces that camped at Ogidi to Bida (Apata, 48). It is significant to note that it was at Kabba Market on the 14th January 1897 that

Royal Niger Company led by George Goldie addressed a large gathering of chiefs who were brought into the town from all over the area thereby announcing the termination of Nupe rule in the area and then hoisted the British Flag at Kabba, consequently bringing the entire Northeast Yoruba under British protection (Vandeleur). By 1900, Lord Fredrick Lugard took over from the Royal Niger Company and the Union Jack was then hoisted on 17th January 1900 at Lokoja. He then declared all territories claimed by the Royal Niger Company to Imperial British Government and Lord Lugard was appointed the British High Commissioner of the Northern Protectorate and Kabba was re-occupied by the British, thus marking the establishment of British administration in Okunland which ended Nupe over lordship in Kabba and its environs (Oshadare, 2008).

Nupe colonialism of Okunland, as it lasted, had no positive intent toward the land and people right from the beginning. It was a mission undertaken with the sole purpose of extending and consolidating Nupe's 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.'

### **British colonial rule and the changing nature of Okun political organisation**

When the British colonial administration began in Northeast Yorubaland, administrative reorganisation was inevitable.

This was embarked upon in line with the British colonial administrative philosophy with the intention that the introduction of the new administrative system would usher in a comprehensive and workable administration. To achieve this, various suggestions had been put forward to the colonial government about the desirability of carving out Agbaja and Kabba emirates from Northeast Yorubaland. Among these suggestions was the recommendation of C. K Meek (1917) that:

In order to consolidate the numerous districts of Kabba division, the Obaro of Kabba should be recognized as the paramount chief of a Kabba emirate which should include the districts of Kabba, Igbedde, Yagba, and Bunu . . . the Olu of Agbaja should become paramount chief of a second emirate which would include the districts of Oworo, Kakanda, Kupa, and Egga. Each emirate was to have one Grade B Court and a native treasury. (NAK Loko Prof. 569 Aworo District Assessment, 1917)

To buttress his demand for the creation of Kabba Emirate, Meek argued further that traditionally, the people of Bunu, Gbedde, Ekinrin-Adde, Ogidi, Iyara, Yagba and Owe "are united by common customs and their speech is practically the same. For these reasons, he suggested that the people should "come formally under Kabba in a real, (not merely nominal) partnership. As regards the

proposed 'Agbaja Emirate', Meek recognised that unlike Kabba, the various ethnic groups that would be merged to form the emirate were not compatible and also differed on religious grounds. Egga, Kupa and Kakanda on one hand, were predominantly Nupe in population; Islam was their dominant religion. The Oworo people, on the other hand, were of the Yoruba stock and were largely non-Muslim. In spite of these disparities, Meek was of the view that "with good handling, the various elements will coalesce into an effective administrative whole" (Ibid). Sydney Smith also joined in the crusade. He advocated the establishment of an enlarged Kabba Emirate comprising not only Yagba, Gbedde and Bunu, but also Akoko and Igbirra districts" (NAK Loko Prof., 2668). The problem associated with Meek's recommendation on Kabba is the fact that though traditionally, the people of Bunu, Gbedde, Ekinrin-Adde, Ogidi, Iyara, Yagba and Owe were united by common customs and their speech was practically the same, the political administration of these groups was practically independent with each of the Okun Communities autonomous and self-governing. Indeed, all the communities were independent of one another and so jealously guarded their independence.

Meek and Smith's proposals paved the way for the introduction of the emirate system to Northeast Yorubaland. It had worked well among the classical emirates in the far north and had made it easier for the British colonial government to execute its indirect



rule policy because most of these states were fairly centralised before the advent of the British. In addition, most of them had a significant proportion of the Muslim population. The same cannot be said of Northeast Yorubaland. The nineteenth-century Nupe administration had failed to integrate the people into the Bida emirate system. Hence the extension of the emirate system to predominantly non-Muslim and intensely nucleated societies of Northeast Yorubaland was bound to run into problems and generate reactions. The attempt to introduce the emirate system led to an extensive administrative reorganization in Northeast Yorubaland. At first, consideration was given to the integration of Kabba Province into the Ilorin Emirate in 1917 to form an enlarged single emirate. This idea was dropped following a strong objection from some British Officers who argued that Ilorin hegemony was never established over Kabba and hence such integration could lead to chaos. This, adoption of the proposals made by C.K. Meek and Sydney Smith, which centred on the creation of Agbaja and Kabba emirates was imperative (Apata, 37). The British colonial arrangement did not take into consideration the pre-Nupe socio-political arrangement in Okunland but rather applied a new system of administration that was fashioned in line with the Nupe "Ogba" system which was an antithesis of the pre-Nupe situation. This, of course, stirred up sharp reactions from the various Okun groups.

In 1900 when the British colonial administration was established in the area, Kabba became the headquarters of what started as No. 1 Division and later Kabba Division. The choice of the name of Kabba for both the division and the province also showed the prominence that was accorded to Owe by the new colonial administration. The town served briefly as the headquarters of the whole Kabba Province. Since it was in the town that all colonial institutions such as the treasury, the court, the prison and the police were located, it meant that all the towns in the neighborhood and indeed Akoko, Ebira and Kukuruku (now Afemai in Edo State) had to be regularly in touch with Kabba (Adebola, 2018).

The administrative districts and social communities were reorganised. For instance, Kupa, Eggan, Kakanda, Budon and Oworo were grouped under the *Olu* of Oworo with headquarters at Agbaja. Similarly, East Yagba, Bunu, Gbedde, Ijumu, Akoko, Igbirra, Owe and some Oworo territories of Obajana, Iwa, Apata, and Oshoko-Shoko were brought under the control of the *Obaro* of Kabba with the headquarters at Kabba. While West Yagba was placed in the Nupe-dominated Lafiagi-Pategi Division of Ilorin Province with its headquarters at Lafiagi. Since the *Olu* of Oworo, Ajokpa and *Obaro Gbayero* Ajibohokun were non-Muslim, it was considered inappropriate to call them emirs, and instead, they were referred to as paramount chiefs; Short of the title "emir", but not in power, they occupied a position

equal to other emirs in Northern Nigeria. They presided over the final court of appeal. As in the classical emirates, they too had district heads that were directly answerable to them (NAK, Loko Prof. 2668).

In 1918, 'Kabba Federation' was created and the Obaro was made the Paramount Chief of the whole of what now constitutes Okunland. All transactions between the colonial administration in the area and the people had to go through the Obaro. The Obaro sent his representatives, who were usually Owe indigenes, to visit Ijumu, Bunu and Yagba communities to ensure that the orders of the administration were satisfactorily carried out. Taxes that were collected in those places by their chiefs were then brought to Kabba and paid to the administration through the Obaro. Courts that were previously in these places were abolished and only the court in Kabba with the Obaro as President was allowed to operate. The allegations of high-handedness on the part of the representatives of the Obaro in some of these communities and reactions against the imposition of the Obaro on people over whom he had no traditional right to govern, led to the dismantling of the arrangement in 1922. The reorganisation also led to protests in the Agbaja emirate. The people of Kupa, Eggan and Kakanda could not submit to the new order. As Nupe and Muslims, they could not accept the *Olu* of Oworo, a non-Muslim and an Okun-Yoruba as their paramount chief. Consequently, his court was boycotted. Thus,

the British colonial authorities began the practice of bringing contiguous communities into the districts for effective centralisation of their administration. In practical terms, as noted by Adalumo, (1995) this new arrangement meant: (i) the abolition of 'petty chiefs', (ii) settlements were made subordinate one to the other quite out of tune with tradition usage; (iii) the arrangement raised the status of a particular village or clan heads to a point at which they could be regarded as superior to those with whom they had shared equal status in pre-British days (Adalumo, 1995). All these were distasteful to the people and created acrimonies, prejudices, and disunity among the Okun people.

In 1917, the British introduced an indirect rule system into Kabba province with Obaro as the paramount chief. This equally provoked increased agitations against the paramountcy of the Obaro and resulted in various administrative reorganisations which saw the progressive weakening of the Obaro's power and of Kabba's position in Kabba Province. Precisely, the protest generated by these colonial arrangements led to the detachment of all the non-Owe groups from Kabba. For instance, in 1918, Akoko was transferred to the south. In 1922, the people of Gbedde were given a district of their own while Igbirra was excised from the Kabba division in 1923. Bunu was made an autonomous district in September 1936, while Oworo and Adde groups (Ijumu Arin) were constituted into separate autonomous units each in 1936

and also Ogidi group (IjumuOke) in 1937. Again, Gbedde, Adde group (Ijumu Arin) and Ogidi group (IjumuOke) were merged into one district in 1937 (Akiniogbin, 1998, 222–223). The West Yagba people, however, had resented having anything to do with the Nupe and hated being grouped in the same division as them. Prince Friday Ogungbemi affirmed that the West Yagba chiefs sent a delegation led by the Asalu of Egbe in 1903 to Ilorin to protest against the inclusion of the area in the Lafiagi–Pategi Division. They objected particularly to having to pay their taxes to the Etsu of Pategi because that rekindled the bitter memories of Nupe rule and had requested to be allowed to pay their taxes directly to the resident commissioner himself. This protest culminated in what was referred to as the 'Mokobon Movement.' The Mokobon Movement which was against the excesses of the Nupe agents of British colonial oppression in Yagbaland was such a reaction (F. Ogungbemi, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

### **Indigenous political organisations: the Okun-Yoruba and the Igbo in comparative perspectives**

Okun community and Igbo society in the pre-colonial era fell under the classification of non-centralised societies because a centralised political system was lacking. Both had a more decentralised political structure that was based on the customs and traditions of the indigenous people. Therefore, the basic socio-political unit among the Okun and the Igbo was the family unit from where the age-

grade institution evolved. The socio-political institution cuts across families and lineages. Each village or community in Okun Yorubaland and Igboland was governed by a council of elders. The governmental powers including political and judicial decisions were widely distributed among members of the independent and overlapping associations. Indeed, the traditional Okun and Igbo Indigenous political system was an exercise in direct democracy on the village level based on a representative assembly. Aside from the representative assembly, some Igbo communities, especially trading cities along the Niger like Onitsha, Oguta, and the Nri ancient kingdom as well as Kabba and Ayere in Okun-Yorubaland, had elaborated chieftaincy institutions in pre-colonial times; though, the Kings were not so powerful like the Oba and Emir in central Yorubaland (Oyo Empire) and Hausa/Fulani Emirates. Ascendance to the top was open and free for any individual irrespective of age or family background and wealth was required to acquire such titles in both societies. Invariably, the titles were not hereditary.

The basic unit was the family, the most operative unit being the kindred, then the village and the town. The village groups were not organised in kingdoms. The function of government was carried on by a council of elders who shared power in various levels of intensity with various other groups – age grades, titled men, women, ritual priests, etc. Both the Okun and the Igbo people are structured on a village-by-village rule system

based on direct democracy and the strong traditional beliefs of the clans. Each village was a 'mini-state' and the people who lived there formed an old political community whose members belonged together by mutual agreement and not by conquest. What was obtainable was, therefore, not a kingdom, but a state and the people could take part in discussions and help in making the final decisions. Hence, the political system in both societies was/is republican in nature.

Thus, the structural organization of both the Okun and the Igbo pre-colonial political system that was charged with the responsibility of judicial, legislative and executive functions includes the family unit, the kindred/extended family, the village council, the chieftaincy title system, the age grade system and the traditional cult system.

### **The family unit**

This was one of the most recognised institutions in the pre-colonial Okun and Igbo society, as the basic unit of every political institution. Each family group was headed by the *Bale* in Okun and *Okpara* in Igbo respectively. The *Bale* and *Okpara* controlled the family and judged any family disputes, especially in the absence of the father. He performed rituals and ceremonial functions on behalf of the family.

### **The extended family**

This was known as *Ebi* and *Umunna* in Okun and Igbo respectively, and this was a form of patriarchy (line of descent traced through the paternal side of the family) maintained by

both the Okun and the Igbo. The *Ebi* or *Umunna* consisted of closely related families and was headed by the eldest male of all the male members of each family. It was seen as the most important pillar of both the Okun and Igbo societies. Members of the same lineage saw themselves as *ebi* or *Umunna* (extended family) or descendants of the same ancestral family which is headed by the *Oloriebi* (Family Head) or *Okpara* in Okun and Igbo respectively.

### **The village council**

This was popularly known as *Ajo* in Okun and *Amala* in Igbo (the council of elders). It was made up of all the family heads in the village. Each family head *Oloriebi* or *Okpara* had the responsibility of discussing the matters that affected the life of the citizens. They also helped in the maintenance of law and order in society as well as in the settlement of disputes between or among families. The chairman of the council was the oldest of all the *Oloriebi* in Okun and *Okpara* in Igbo. In Okunland, groups of families of the same magnetic descent constituted the *aku* (or clan). Two or more *aku* formed the *adugbo* (or quarter); usually, the oldest member of the most senior lineage became *Olori adugbo* (head of quarter) where a group of related lineages merged to form an enlarged community. The oldest man was selected as the *Oloriilu*. In Igboland, the town council was the highest political unit made up of villages which were collections of kindreds

with attachment of the land (*Ala* or *Ani*) as a common unifier.

### Chieftaincy title system

This formed an important organ in the administrative machinery of the Okun and the Igbo society. Holders of these chieftaincy titles usually are individuals of high integrity who are popular and wealthy. They settled disputes and rendered valuable advice. The chieftaincy titles in Okunland are also grouped into three hierarchical traditional political systems controlled by a three-tiered body of traditional chiefs namely three-titled chief called *Oloru*, a double-titled chief called *Orota*, and a single-titled chief called *Igemo*. In Igboland where the *Ofor* and *Ozo* titles exist, the *Ozo* title holders remain the highest and most influential title holders. Chieftaincy titles in Okun and Igbo are non-hereditary. Each family head held a title as was typical of the *Okpara* in Igbo society who were named '*ofo*' title holders, while the *OloriEbi* in Okunland held at least one title. They had the responsibility of discussing the matters that affected the lives of the citizens. They also helped in the maintenance of law and order in society as well as in the settlement of disputes between or among families members. In the village assembly, the chairman of the council was usually the highest or eldest of all the Heads. *Orota* titles and *Ozo* titles were usually the highest titles of honor in Okunland and in Igboland respectively, which were given to specific individuals in pre-colonial Okun and Igbo societies.

### Age grade system

The Age Grade System was one of the fundamental institutions of government and the principle of traditional political organisation both in Okun and Igbo societies, which was also variedly developed in the cultures of some other African nationalities. The Age Grade System is a manifestation of the republican way of life of both the Okun and the Igbo societies as well as their popular system of direct village democracy. The age grade was an association of people that belonged to the same age group. Members of an age group were selected based on the criterion of being born within a particular period.

In Okunland, the age-grade known as *Ote* or *Egbe* featured prominently in the indigenous political administration of Okun society by constituting the bedrock of the Okun traditional political system through which the youths were introduced to the norms and laws of the society. The age grade system which was interwoven with the chieftaincy system symbolised the stratification of the society. In the age group system, two categories of people emerged, namely the title holders and non-title holders. The title holders were *Oloru* (three title holders), *Orota* (two title holders) and *Igemo* (one title holders); while the non-title holders known as the *Gbarufu-moso* were divided into *Omeko* and *Olusele* in order of seniority. The first two grades (*Olusele* and *Omeko*) were somewhat natural and automatic since they operated

on the basis of birth, while the remaining three (*Igemo, Orota* and *Oloru*) were never automatic simply because they were subjected to certain prerequisites. While some Igbo societies selected age group members based on those born in a particular year, some were based on a span of two years.

The roles played by the age grades in both societies include among other things, public duties such as the construction of roads and markets as well as clearing the paths; they protected and defended the village from enemies; they helped in the implementation of policies made by the council of elders; they helped to maintain law and order. As a multi-functional institution, the Age Grade System through the creation of opportunities for systematic political participation by every member of the community, strengthened the popular democratic process as well as the stable development of the political and other related institutions.

### **The traditional cult system**

This was another political institution in the pre-colonial Okun and Igbo society. The Okun and Igbo Societies like any other African society had their own traditional belief system which manifested in their belief in deities. The indigenous religion cut across different towns and villages with different names and their different festivals held at different periods of the year. Their religion was seemingly intricate because it replicated the social, political and other aspects of the

occupational life of the people, and served as a bond of unity and identity. In addition, many of the Okun and Igbo communities have deities and festivals in which the chief priests served as link between the people and their ancestors. Both had respect for the deities and departed ancestors. A typical instance was the *Oro* in Iffe-Ijumu (Ufe), Iyamoye (Iya) and Ekinrin-Ade, the worship of the same *Ebora Yeu* by Owe (Kabba) and Ayere during which food and other presents were exchanged. In Igboland, Ala was popularly known as the goddess of the land. Cases of defilement of the land such as murder, homicide and adultery were judged by the Ala. To Ala, there was a priest called Ala's priest who interpreted the pronouncement of the Ala to the villagers. This explains Igbo belief in deities (such as Amadioha, Igwe-ka-ala, Ezemuo, Ogbaebu etc) in times of need to the present day.

The women were not left out in the administration of Okunland and Igboland. In Okun society, they were organised into cults like Imole and *Ofosi* through which their views on issues especially those that touched on rituals were amplified. Also, through these cults, the women were organised to play specific roles in the society. While in Igbo society, there are female age-grade assemblies, individual leaders and female titles in some places.

The judicial system in Okunland and Igboland could be said to be the responsibility of the entire community. The apparatus for justice

administration is community-based because institutions such as the chieftaincy system, age grade system, and cult system were employed to ensure justice; discipline and public morality were instilled in both the Okun and the Igbo society. In Okunland the judicial system of the Okun people in the pre-colonial era was an integral part of the political organisation of the Okun people. The administration of justice in Okunland and Igboland before the European colonisation was decentralised. For instance, in Okun land, disputes were settled ranging from family court sitting through the family head, or village court and then ended up in *Nko* (*Oba* Court). The *Idile* as the basic socio-political unit served as the court of first instance where intra-family quarrels and other petty issues were resolved under the *Olori Ebi* (*Bale*) who served as the judge. Serious cases especially those that involved different families within the same quarter were directed to the court of *Obaladugbo* for adjudication. However, cases that involved murder, arson, abduction and destruction of economic trees were heard by *Nko* which is the highest Judicial Tribunal in Okunland. The system is based on the immutable law of the land usually referred to as "*a daiyeba*" The *Oba's* court (*Nko*) which was presided over by an *Ololu* where the *Ololu* and Senior *Orotas* sat in council. The decisions arrived at were executed by the age group. For instance, *Omeko* (*Gbarufu-Moso*) in Oweland (Kabba) acted as the policemen while the *Igemo* (one titled chiefs monitored the proceedings and

also ensured that proper execution of the decisions of the tribunal/court was carried out. In Igbo judicial administration, the family settled minor disputes at the family level. Cases beyond the family went to the village council (*Amala*). Serious disputes such as murder, land, homicide, birth of abnormal children were executed by the deities and the priests played great roles. The age grade also settled minor disputes.

It should be noted that, before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the traditional religions typified in the worship of *deities* and their associated traditional cults and festivals, played vital roles in the socio-cultural and religious lives of the people, thereby becoming a rallying point for social interaction, unity and integration. They played vital roles in funeral rites, judicial matters and chieftaincy ceremonies.

In summary, the traditional political system in the Okun and the Igbo societies was republican and accounted for the decentralisation of powers. The legislative, executive and judicial powers were fused together, and decision-making was based on direct democracy. It is important to note that separation of powers and taxation were absent in both the Okun and the Igbo pre-colonial political systems.

### **Political organisations in Okunland and Igboland under British colonial rule**

By the time the British government gained political control over the territory administered by the Royal Niger Company

through the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, the British government lacked sufficient personnel to administer the territory directly. As British administrative officers and personnel were extremely few and scarce, it became necessary to utilise the services of local indigenes in the governance of the people. Consequently, local agents were selected (often arbitrarily) to serve as members of native councils and native courts. Such members obtained official letters (warrants) from the high commissioner or provincial commissioner appointing them to their respective native councils or native courts. With the experience in India, Britain quickly adopted the indirect rule system in Nigeria. However, the non-centralised nature of Okunland and Igboland of Nigeria posed a greater problem to the British government because the British system was a centralised one. The innovation brought into the political organisation of both societies through the establishment of British colonial rule was associated with the introduction of taxes and warrant chiefs for the Igbo and paramount rulers for the Okun.

The British attempted to rule the people through their indigenous political institutions. While the system was partially successful in Okunland though not without opposition and agitation which necessitated further administrative reorganisation, the warrant chief system failed primarily in Igboland because it was based on assumptions which had no root in

indigenous soil. The study revealed that the creation of a quasi-emirate system in Okun-Yorubaland failed because the interests of the British colonial authorities and the governed were diametrically opposed to each other. The British created the centralised system in order to make it possible to administer the various autonomous Okun groups, who obviously wanted to retain their autonomy. The introduction of a centralised system, however, was seen as a threat to this autonomy and rejected because it was not relevant to the indigenous political system. It should be noted however, that in Okunland, the system of centralised authority through a recognised chief was introduced, but it did not completely achieve the long-term objective that it was supposed to serve due to its inherent incompatibility with the Okun traditional system of government. Naturally, the people resisted this system and so serious was this resistance that it crystallised into constant agitation, protest and petition thereby creating additional difficulties for the colonial administration. Consequently, the colonial government had no option but to embark upon administrative reorganisations of the Okun area which began in 1922. Likewise, the Igbo had no centralised authority and each village or town cherished its sovereignty. The British had to subdue every community at a significant cost in men and materials. The British, without consultation, appointed warrant chiefs over the people, which the people considered an affront and an



imposition. Afigbo (1972) elaborated on the impact of the administrative changes upon the Igbo in his classic, *The Warrant Chiefs*, while Korieh (2010) has articles on the dynamics of women's social mobilization in colonial Eastern Nigeria and its link to the imposition of British indirect rule. Korieh's analysis of women's social protest in the period of British rule raised an important question of interest to social scientists including the role of women in indigenous African societies and how such roles were undermined by European colonialism and administrative changes.

The innovation negated the indigenous socio-political structure coupled with the fact that those appointed by the British overlords were mainly the social misfits. These paramount rulers in Okunland and the warrant chiefs in Igboland wielded absolute power over their chiefdoms, imposing taxation arbitrarily, confiscating properties – especially farm lands, manipulating justice in the Native Courts they presided over, and many other abominable acts. People became uncomfortable with the new power structure and subsequently resisted every move to impose warrant chiefs on them.

British colonial policies became the fundamental sources of trouble, with particular regard to the socio-economic and political innovations that upset the indigenous peoples. Because of the incompatibility of both the Igbo and Okun's decentralised style of government with the

centralised system (including the appointment of warrant chiefs and taxation required for the British system of indirect rule), the period of colonial rule was marked by numerous conflicts and tension. The female victims of agricultural change in Igboland, for instance, resolutely challenged the oppressive regime which is evident in the Aba Women's riot of 1929. Likewise, in the face of protest and persistent reactions from the people, the British colonial authorities were forced to shift grounds. The idea of administration based on the emirate system was progressively and ultimately abandoned in Okun-Yorubaland. The colonial authorities were forced to initiate further administrative reorganisation processes which drastically reduced the influence and status of the Olu of Agbaja and the Obaro of Kabba and also broke the Nupe hegemony on the West Yagba people thereby resulting in the unification of the West Yagba of Ilorin Province and the East Yagba of Kabba Province into one division under Kabba Province.

Thus, the agitations and protests culminated in what was referred to as the 'Mokobon Movement' which opposed the excesses of the Nupe agents of British colonial oppression in Yagbaland. Ijagbemi Adeleye affirmed that there were two phases of the movement which may be distinguished. The first opened with the appointment of Kpotun (a Nupe man) as district head in 1924 and terminated with his removal in 1928 as a result of sustained criticism and protest. The

second phase took off with "the great trek" of the Yagba elders to Lafiagi in 1929, to formally and dramatically register their objection to continued Nupe overlordship and ended with the appointment of a Yagba district head for West Yagba in June 1930 (Ijagbemi, 1934). The movement was thus a complex, multi-dimensional, anti-colonial action which involved the whole of West Yagba and elicited considerable support from the Yagba of Kabba and Ondo Provinces. The proposed Yagba administrative reorganisation which was intended to take off in 1934, involved the merger of West Yagba of Ilorin province with East Yagba of Kabba Province to form a bigger autonomous Yagba Native Administration with its own treasury. The proposal according to the British, arose from the discontent expressed by the Pategi Yagba (i.e., West Yagba) with their subjection to Nupe rule.

In summary, the administrative reorganisations of 1934 in Yagbaland were a consequent of the Mokobon protest movement. Viewed against the background of the general colonial reforms of the early years of the 1930s in Nigeria, and indeed in British colonial Africa as a whole, the reform was the result of a fundamental change of attitude with regard to the colonial administration of native populations. The administrative restructuring which the British implemented in 1934 was based largely on the people's submissions. In other words, the desire to get the Nupe removed as district heads had been viewed only as a

prelude to a desired unification of the different sections of the Yagba.

The British colonial institutions and policies weakened the traditional institutions in the Okun and the Igbo societies. For instance, the native court proclamation (1901) outlawed all traditional tribunals in Igboland. It recognised only the native court for judiciary matters, though the traditional tribunals continued to function in the villages. Even with the appointment of warrant chiefs, the council of elders continued making laws, but this time, they were not to infringe on any human right. They equally continued to judge cases, even though the appeal was no longer restricted, and they no longer handled criminal cases. In 1917, the British introduced an indirect rule system into Kabba province (Okunland) with Obaro as the paramount chief. This provoked increased agitations against the paramountcy of the Obaro and resulted in various administrative reorganisations which saw the progressive weakening of the Obaro's power and of Kabba's position in Kabba Province. Precisely, the protest generated by these colonial arrangements led to the detachment of all the non-Owe groups from Kabba. For instance, in 1918 Akoko was transferred to the south. In 1922, the Gbedde was given a district of their own while Igbirra was excised from the Kabba division in 1923. Bunu was made an autonomous district in September 1936 while Oworo and Adde groups (Ijumu Arin) were constituted into separate autonomous units each in 1936 and

also the Ogidi group (Ijumu Oke) in 1937. Again Gbedde, Adde group (Ijumu Arin) and Ogidi group (Ijumu Oke) were merged into one district known as Ijumu in 1937 (Akinjogbin, 222-223).

British colonial rule led to the forceful grouping of people. British colonial arrangement balkanised the Yagba subgroup of Okun. While East Yagba were included as a district of the Kabba division in a newly created Kabba province with headquarters in Kabba town, West Yagba were placed in the Nupe-dominated Lafiagi-Pategi Division of Ilorin Province with its headquarters at Lafiagi. The Imilike people in the Nsukka axis of Igboland came under Obollo Ulo customary court with a surprising and strange instruction that all her disputes should be referred to it. Arguably therefore, the role of the Royal Niger Company army led by George Goldie in sacking the Fulani/Nupe forces in Okunland on the 14th January 1897 and consequently the signing of a treaty on the 6th of February 1897, terminating Nupe's ruthless administration and proclaiming the "freedom" of the subject people made the Okun people to see the British as saviour.

### Conclusion

This paper observed that in conceptualising the indirect rule system in the administration of the decentralised societies of Okunland and Igboland, Lugard insisted on a centralised system of administration which was the emirate system. The extension and

application of the indirect rule system were done in basically three ways. In the first approach, because it was assumed that the non-centralised societies were at a low level of political development and had no allegiance to a paramount chief, it was imperative to introduce a centralised system of governance by conferring authority on a recognised chief. The second approach involved the imposition of alien personnel and concepts of justice and administration. The third approach entailed imposing the power of a paramount ruler on groups of societies lying within or adjacent emirates.

Colonialism ruptured the organic interdependence amongst and between the various pre-colonial social formations it agglomerated into a single political unit. In this connection, colonialism was the catalyst of the changes and continuities in interactions in both Okunland and Igboland. Under colonialism, for example, the Okun and the Igbo lost the variable of relative autonomy which defined the basis of their political organisation and existence in pre-colonial times. As a matter of fact, not only did colonial conquest erode the basis for independent action among the various Okun and Igbo communities, but the fundamental shift from an essentially decentralised and independent political structure that was based on the customs and traditions of the indigenous people, to a centralised political system that was based on foreign ideology.

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