

IRREDENTISM IN OKUN-YORUBA LAND OF NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF YAGBA MOKOBON PROTEST MOVEMENT OF 1930

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Abstract

Irredentism is the doctrine of 'redeeming' territory from another state especially where there are some historical claims to the territory or when an ethnic group seeks to rejoin the major part of the ethnic group in another state. Irredentism as a term, originally applied to a policy advocated in Italy in the 19th century for the acquisition of foreign territories claimed as Italian, because of previous Italian sovereignty over them or of ethnic affinity. The Italian irredentist movement originated in about 1878 and was essentially a manifestation of the intensely nationalist movement that has succeeded in 1871 after decades of struggle in creating a united Italian nation. It is against this general background that irredentist movement in Okun-Yorubaland specifically among the Yagba-subgroup of Okunland, shall be viewed, highlighting the colonial government reactions, which eventually led to the unification of all Yagba segments into one federation in 1934.

Introduction

Yagba" could be referred to as a dialect, people, culture and district. The groups that make up Yagbaland were one people, homogenous, speaking more or less the same dialect of the broad spectrum of the Yoruba language. They equally observed similar cultural laws and customs, professing similar religions, claiming in most cases descents from a common ancestor. Presently, Yagba people are found mainly in some Local Government Areas of Mopa-Muro, Yagba East and Yagba West in the present day Kogi State, where they form part of the Okun Yoruba group of people that are in North Central Nigeria.

Also, we have small pockets of Yagba citizens which are to be found in present day Kwara and Ekiti States (Ogidan, 2003). Based on their geographical location and the slight variation in their dialects, Yagba territory could be divided into three sub-groups. These are the Yagba of Egbe, Eri, Ere, Ogga, Omi, Ejiba, Koro, Okoloke, Isanlu Essa, Ogbe and Agboro areas in the western position of the Yagba territory. The second group is made up of Yagba of Ejuku, Ife-Olukotun, Poyan, Alu, Igbagun, Oranre, Jege, Ogbom, Takete, Mopa, Isanlu Amuro, Ilai, Isao, Imela and Agimi. All these settlements are located in the south eastern part of the territory. The third groups are the Yagba of Irele, Eruku, Koro, Oke-Ako, Iye and Itapaji, all located in the south western part of the territory.

However, for obvious reasons of historiography and in line with the major focus of this paper, the first mentioned group, i.e., the Yagba on the western portion shall be discussed, since it was that portion that the first ever protest movement against Nupe rule occurred. This protest movement locally referred to *Mokobon* (I reject Ibon) took place in that part and the result of that protest in 1934, led to the general administrative reorganization that affected all Yagba territories by the British colonial and ministrations.

Pre-Colonial Settings

Before the colonial period there existed a situational and economic co-existence between the western Yagba people and the Nupe Patigi. As a result of close geographical location of the two settings, there existed a sort of inter-trade relationships, which equally resulted into a kind of cultural assimilation and cooperation. As earlier on stated there was a cordial relationship between the people of Yagba and their Nupe counter parts at least up to around 1854 when Nupe direct extension of political control was experienced by the Yagba people. Some historians like Apata (2011), have argued that the Nupe invasion of Yagba territory was an extension of the Islamic revolution started by Usman Dan Fodio in Hausa land in the 19th century. The propagation of Islam cannot be taken as the truth because, Egbe which was the power base of the Nupe where her forces attacked other neighboring Yagba communities, had very few indigenous Moslems. In fact, after the Nupe conquest of the area, the people were left to practice their traditional religions without any form of interference (Ogidan, 1994).

It was believed in some quarters that it was the rivalry between two Nupe princes, Yerima of Lafiagi, Usman and Masaba which resulted into a war between them that forced Masaba to take refuge at Egbe from where he sought help from the people of the district against his rivals. According to Barkie, (1996), Masaba was a cruel and tyrannical ruler and was therefore dreaded by his subjects and even his neighbors. In the early part of 1854, his people rose against him *en mass* and drove him into exile. He fled Nupe land and was received and sheltered by some Moslems in Ilorin. Among the places he took refuge was Egbe from where he mobilized his forces and with the assistance from the natives, he waged a counter war against his rivals and regained his leadership of Nupe kingdom.

Seeing the human and natural resources in Yagbaland, which the warring parties needed to prosecute the war and consolidate their positions, therefore, the Nupe forces focused their attentions on raiding Yagba territories for slaves. Slaves were also needed to replenish their soldiers and used in exchange for ammunitions. Slaves were also needed to produce food for the fighting forces in Nupeland, because agricultural production has been affected negatively as a result of the internal wranglings in Nupeland for the throne. This has resulted into scarcity of food items due to the fact that able-bodied men who were supposed to be on the farms are now in the battle fronts. Under this circumstance therefore, the conquest and control of Yagbaland and indeed all Okunland became part of the strategy of the warring parties.

Nupe Administrative Machinery in Yagbaland

After the conquest and annexation of Yagbaland by the Nupe forces, they imposed new systems of administration on the conquered people. On conquest, the Nupe took administrative measures to achieve its economic and political motives. Yagbaland was turned

into tribute paying centres by means of administrative machinery put in place known as the *Ogba* system, which was similar to *Ajele* system of the Yoruba kingdoms. An *Ogba* was the representative of the *Etsu* and were stationed in some power centres in Yagbaland like Egbe, Islanlu etc. In the words of Obayemi (1978), the *Ogba* wielded immense power with no advisory council nor a check on his power. The delineation of the dependency into fiefs for administrative ease was done by the *Etsu*, a division which, in anyway, did not conform to the indigenous pattern of administration (Oshadare, 2015). A fief, for instance, could comprise of a number of autonomous scattered communities with no tradition of political and administrative control or association before Nupe era. Writing on the imposition of the *Ogba* on the Okun people, Ade Obayemi (1978) states that:

... the appointment of individuals to exercise responsibility beyond its own mini-states was an innovation in the political history of the Okun.

Archival sources (1917) indicated that the delineation and the number of fiefs varied with different Nupe rulers. Usually, however, an *Ogba* ruled over a fief which was usually deliberately made small to prevent him from becoming too powerful. Yagbaland was divided into two fiefs. While the southeast was under *Ogba* Raji the western portion was put under *Ogba* Maliki.

In the appointment of an *Ogba*, importance was not placed on the ethnic origin, but on cooperation with and loyalty to the ruling power. In some cases, some of these fief holders who did not reside in the territories appointed their own *Ogba* who were responsible to them. This category of *Ogba* oral sources recalled was most ruthless (Arotiba, 1989). The utmost concern of the Nupe overlords was how large tributes and other resources could be derived from the fiefs and not how well they were governed. Accordingly, their representatives used their administrative powers to ruthlessly exploit their subjects. The *Ogba's* primary aim was tribute collection. As earlier on noted, the powers of the *Ogba* was boundless and there was no refraining influence on the *Ogba's* activities, in as much as their action in their area of control, did not contradict the Bida power. It was therefore not a surprise that the *Ogba* generally saw themselves as alternatives to the local chiefs of their respective areas of control.

For the *Ogba* to successfully fulfill his primary assignment of tribute collection and to efficiently fulfill this role, he had at his disposal a detachment of warriors. This military detachment assisted the *Ogba* during tribute collection. The *Ogba* usually demonstrated a high degree of commitment to his duty, since prompt payment of tribute to the *Etsu* served not only as a test of loyalty of the subjects, but also a demonstration of the efficiency of the *Ogba*. As a reward, the *Ogba* who returned large, received *Etsu's* award known as *Tokoshi* (Oshadare, 2015). This award could be in form of a sword, cowries, horses or slaves. As a result of this, the *Ogba* therefore struggled to receive *Tokoshi* which was the visible sign of *Etsu's* favor.

During the reign of *Etsu's* Maliki, (1884-1898), the *Ogba's* excesses and Nupe's rule in the area of study and indeed the entire Okun Yorubaland generally reached a monumental level of absurdity. S.F Nadel (1942), describes him as the ... wealthiest *Etsu* Nupe ... but avaricious and cruel, under him, taxes reached an almost insufferable height". This was not totally unlike the warrant chiefs system in eastern Nigeria in the early days of colonialism, when warrant chiefs were allowed to ride rough over their people as long as they remained in the good books of the British colonial administration.

As long as *Etsu* Maliki received his share of tribute, the *Ogba* were left alone to make what they could out of their assigned domains. During his reign, Yagbaland specifically and Okunland in general 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 Mason (1970), ... the levy of tax on the Yoruba subjects increases appreciably. As it became more difficult to pay in produce or kind slaves and children were rendered to *Ogba* or seized by the *Ogbas*". In pursuit of more tributes collection, the *Ogba* became repressive in their demands. This repressiveness made the *Ogba* institution objectionable to the subject people (Mason, 1981).

The Ogidi Grand Alliance and the Termination of Nupe Rule in Okunland

In about 1888, the Royal Niger Company declared Lokoja independent of Bida and stopped tribute collection by the *Ogba* from that area. From then on, the company encouraged other areas under Nupe's control or sphere of influence to rebel against it. Mohammed (2011), Possibly the RNC was aware of the growing dissent by Okun people against Nupe rule and therefore fanned the embers of that dissent. Christian missionaries who had settled in Lokoja and were spreading their activities in the area and neighboring communities also encouraged the rebellion against Bida. The encouragement of rebellion against Bida was intensified from 1893, following the failure of the supposed reconciliation meeting between the RNC and the Bida authorities to achieve lasting reconciliation due to a clash of interest. (Mason, 1981).

As the RNC and the missionaries intensified their encouragement of rebellion against Bida, the Bida authorities also intensified their military campaigns against the rebellious areas. The RNC and the missionaries called it slave raids. But as Mason (1970) pointed out, the term slave-raiding was simply exploited by the British to cover up their own imperialism. Apata (1991) also points out that, the Bida campaigns against the rebellious areas were to reinforce the payment of *Jizja* (tribute) which the area had earlier been made to pay. As a result, some Okun settlements such as Yagba, Bunu, Oworo and Ijumu which rebelled frequently were attacked more than in the pre-1893 period (Apata, 2011). However, frequent attacks on the rebellious settlements also made them more rebellious especially as a result of the excesses of the attackers (Akintoye, 1971).

The rebellious settlements subsequently formed an alliance known as Ogidi Grand Alliance against Bida in 1894 (Ibid). This alliance was primarily formed to overthrow Nupe rule in the whole of Okunland. After the overthrow of the Nupe hegemony in 1897 by the troops of the Ogidi Grand Alliance and that of the RNC, the people of Okunland in general and Yagbaland in particular welcome Goldie and his men. Some communities openly jubilated because of the intolerable harsh conditions which the previous Nupe administration had subjected them through incessant raids, forceful migration and encroachments into their tradition.

After the peace accord signed between the troops of the RNC and the leaders of Ogidi Grand Alliance, Goldie and some of his commanders moved to Kabba, one of the Nupe administrative centres, in February 1897. There, they addressed a large crowd together with some traditional chiefs. In his speech, Goldie assured the people of Okunland that in place of the intolerable conditions to which the previous Nupe administration had subjected them, the white man would restore peace and good governance among the various communities. With

these promises, the people of the territory described their new over lords as *atayese* (reformer of the world) (Ogidan, 2003).

The Establishment of District Head System.

The District Head system was set up in Northeast Yorubaland (Okunland) by the British colonial administration in 1914. This aspect of Native administration inaugurated by the British was well developed in Ilorin and other emirates of northern Nigeria. In these emirates, the district head system was aimed at replacing the *Jekauda* system (Fief holders) and streamlining their multiplicity of taxation system with a view of making it efficient (Lugard 1970).

The extension of the district head system in Yagbaland assumed a different dimension. It became a potent instrument for re-shaping the entire administrative system in the region. The goal was to build up a centralized system of administration conceived as the end process of administrative development. To this end, the numerous scattered communities which were historically autonomous, self-governing and acknowledging no paramount head were brought under a district head. Frederick Lugard spelt out the aim thus:

The first step is to hasten the transition from the patriarchal to the tribal stage, and induce those who acknowledge no other authority than the head of the family to recognize a common chief. Where this stage has already been reached, the object is to group together small tribes or sections of a tribe so as to form a small administrative unit (Lugard, 1970).

We have demonstrated earlier on that through the *Ogba* system, the Nupe overlords imposed the one-man rule on some sections of Northeast Yorubaland particularly in Yagbaland. This was subsequently used as a reference point in many colonial reports to justify the British colonial government's introduction of the district head system. The two systems by the Nupe and the British exhibited some similar characteristics. For instance, both systems represented an imposition of a single chief system by alien powers and equally served as efficient tool for the collection of revenue.

However, the British imposed district headship was more comprehensive in nature. The district heads were handpicked. Those selected were literally regarded as chiefs by the colonial authorities and were made to administer areas which were traditionally outside their control. This administrative system or innovation did not go well with the people.

The appointment of Nupe District Headman by the British to manage the affairs of West Yagba was not pleasing to the inhabitants. By bringing Nupe men as District headmen in Yagbaland, brought about a new set of problems. Because of their precolonial record of brutality and enslavement of many Yagba citizens, the Nupe were hated by the people. And for the British to have brought them back as headmen was considered a most objectionable arrangement. Although the Yagba people welcomed the British intervention of 1897 that ended Nupe over-rule, but this new arrangement changed the people's opinion.

Mokobon Protest Movement

The Egbe riot of 1903 marked the beginning of the people's protest against their inclusion in the Nupe dominated Patigi Division (Apata, 2011). In spite of the suppression of the 1903 protest led by Asalu, the people of West Yagba did not relent in their efforts to see an end to the district head-system and the removal of the British appointed Nupe District Headmen imposed on them by the British colonial authorities.

In 1928, the desire of the people to achieve autonomy took a new turn. Two principal factors accounted for this development. Firstly, *Kpotun* Chonku, a Nupe man who became the district head of Patigi Division in 1924, was very ruthless (NAK Annual Report) 1924. He regarded West Yagba as an estate to be “farmed” and was insensitive to the hardship and sufferings which his actions have brought on the people. The 1928 Annual Report described him as “unduly despotic”. His high-handedness further pushed the people to demand for the separation from Pategi.

The second factor was the influence of Paul Ampitan who became the Egbe community leader in 1928. He was able to mobilize the support of the people within and outside Yagbaland in the struggle to detach West Yagba from Patigi Division. One of such people won over was David Adeniyi (popularly known as *Alaga*) (Ijagbemi 1984). Adeniyi was literate, eloquent and outspoken. He was also very close to Reverend Titcombe, (a pioneer missionary in Yagbaland), together with some other S.I.M. trained Christian zealots formed a group of protesters aptly described by Ijagbemi as “Mokobon” (“*Ibon* rejected” *Ibon* is the local name for Nupe) protest movement.

The group wrote the colonial authorities several times between 1923 and 1924 requesting for the complete removal of the alien Nupe District headship from West Yagba. Most of the petitioners were S.I.M. trained personnel working as teachers, preachers, choir masters and Sunday school teacher’s resident in different parts of Yagbaland. The composition of this group helped to spread the protest at the grassroot (Ogidan 2003). The group also worked closely with Yagba indigenes resident in Lagos and other central Yoruba towns with the intention of enlisting their support in pressurizing the colonial authorities to approve their demand. They also sent delegates to Ilorin, Patigi and Lokoja between 1926 and 1928 at different times to put the case of the people of the area before Senior British political office holders in those districts and provincial headquarters.

As a result of persistent criticisms and protest against the Nupe headmen’s administration, Chonku was finally removed from his position in 1928 by the British colonial authorities. He was however, succeeded by Shaaba, also a Nupe man. The successor died mysteriously within one year of his appointment. Shaaba was replaced by Lupon who assumed office in January, 1929. By the time he assumed office the rumbling of popular discontent of the generality of the people of West Yagbaland have developed into a full-blown mass of anti-Nupe and anti-colonial agitation in the area.

The last straw that broke the camel’s back happened in 1928. A tax defaulter who took refuge in the Mission House in Egbe was dragged out of the premises and flogged mercilessly by his assailants. The incident encouraged the S.I.M Missionaries in the town to openly support the group of protesters in their bid to spear-heading the total removal of West Yagba from Lafiagi/Pategi Division. The incident also spread like wild fire to all nooks and corners of the entire Yagbaland. The development also increased the people’s hatred for Nupe administration in the area. It also encouraged more people to willingly join the group of agitators (Mo – ko – bon movement).

In 1929, the group held a meeting at *Okutadudu* in Odo-Ere to decide the next line of action. The meeting was attended by a large crowd. The sole purpose of the meeting was to strategise on how to get rid of the alien headship in West Yagbaland. The Missionary, Reverend

Titcombe and some S.I.M. local pastors and evangelists played prominent roles during the deliberations at the *Okutadudu* meeting. For instance, they appealed to the people not to be violent in the action. The leader of the group were encouraged by popular support for the organization from the masses especially the village and clan heads who had hitherto been lukewarm towards the activities of the group at the initial state of their operations for fear of possible intimidation by the agents of Nupe administration.

As a buildup, there were three separate meetings or assembly gathering of every community within Yagba West between 1928 – 1930. In attendance were also Yagba delegates from Lagos and other major Yoruba towns like Ilesha, Ibadan Oshogbo among others. It was at the third and last of the series of the meetings held at *Okutadudu* in January 1930 that a decision was made to embark on a mass trek to Lafiaji to demonstrate in practical terms to the British officials the people's total rejection of Nupe headman among them.

Subsequently, in February, 1930 some Yagba elders and their people commenced a twenty-mile marathon trek to Lafiaji. Some of the leading figures were *Oba* Daniel Osamoka of Ogga who led the delegation. The *Obas* or their representatives of Egbe, Ere, Eri, Ogbe and Okoloke were in the team. The S.I.M. delegation was led by *Alaga* David Adeniyi from Ogga. Adeniyi was educated and a close associate to Reverend Titcombe. About fifty people started the journey from Egbe. By the time the group reached Pategi, on the second day, the number had swelled up to over two hundred (Ogidan, 2003). On reaching Pategi, it was a mammoth crowd that greeted the District Officer. A formal letter of protest was presented to him. As arrest in this circumstance could lead to unprecedented riot, he simply accepted the protest letter with a promise to forward it to the Resident. The letter was written by *Alaga* David Adeniyi and it contained all the atrocities meted on the people of that part of the territory by Nupe headmen. The letter ended with a passionate plea that the alien over-lordship be removed immediately. The British officer was very sympathetic with the group and told them to return home peacefully with a promise to take their pleas to the Resident at Ilorin for his urgent attention and consideration.

Back home, the people vented their anger on all Nupe residents in their midst, a situation which led to mysterious deaths and disappearance of many Nupe citizens resident in that part of the territory. Lupou, the Nupe district headman, sensing danger wisely stayed back in Pategi. In June 1930, the Resident in charge of Ilorin province accompanied by the District Officer (D.O) and the *Etsu* Pategi paid the much-awaited visit to Egbe, where a crowd had gathered patiently waiting to hear from British political officers. At the mass meeting the Resident formally announced the decision of the colonial authorities to terminate Nupe headship with immediate effect and to the plan to choose an indigene of Yagba in his place. He further assured the gathering that the man of their choice would be endorsed by the colonial authorities as their district head. This was done in 1931, when Iyewarun, the *Elere* of Ere was appointed as the first indigenous district head (Apata, 2011).

However, the replacement of a Nupe district head with an indigene did not wholly satisfy the people because they were still not removed from Pategi Division of Ilorin Province. Furthermore, as far as the people were concerned, the district head system was essentially a Nupe feature and their desire was its total eradication. Hence, the measures taken by the British colonial authorities between 1930 and 1931 were seen as merely palliatory.

In one sense, the *Mokobon* protest movement aroused pan-Yagba feelings. As a result, much thought was given to the administrative system that would best serve the interests of the different sections of Yagbaland as a whole. As rightly put by Adeleye Ijagbemi (1984), "the desire to get the Nupe removed as district head had been viewed only as a prelude to a desired unification of the different sections of Yagba". However, the impression created by Ijagbemi identifying *Mokobin* protest movement singularly as warranting subsequent administrative reorganization by the British in 1934 may not totally be correct. There is another crucial factor that came to play and that was the Donald Cameron's Administrative reforms of 1934.

The Donald Camerons Administrative Reform

Donald Cameron's administrative reforms led to an unprecedented administrative reorganization in the Northern provinces. His varied administrative experiences influenced the reforms. He was among the very few British colonial officials that had varied experiences by serving both in the Northern and Southern provinces of Nigeria. This varied experience espoused him to have a kind of hind sight in deeper perspectives on the aspirations and problems as it affected the colonized in the Nigerian region than any other British officers who spent all their administrative experiences and services in one region (Smith, 1969). Cameron came to Nigeria at the time when some parts of Nigeria were engulfed in serious crisis like Aba women riot of 1929, the Tiv *Haaka* movement of 1929-1930 (Craig, 1971). These aforementioned crises and others of similar nature were reflections of the shortcomings of the Lugardian administrative policies. These upheavals therefore reinforce Cameron's belief that administrative reforms were desirable in order to prevent similar occurrences in other parts of the country.

In his speech to the Legislative Council on 6th March, 1933, Cameron left no one a doubt about his intention to effect a decisive change of policy (Cameron, 1933). Cameron's administrative reforms were set out in the Memorandum captioned "The principles of Native Administration and their full Application". This memorandum served as a general exposition of the principles on which the native administration was based. The areas mostly affected by this reform were the non-emirate areas of Northern Nigeria, where he called for a thorough re-examination.

He observed that no system of administration should be imposed on the people without prior investigation into the forms of Native administration that would best suit them. He also advocated that indigenous administration should be built "from bottom" and that no attempt should be made to the past "to make a crown or king at the top and try to find something underneath on which it might appropriately be placed (Cameron, 1937).

Finally, Cameron made it clear that the functions of administrative officers should not end after establishing an acceptance administrative system; rather they should continue to assist in its development and to ensure a just government. In all, Donald Cameron was out to develop as sort of local self-government acceptable to the people (Nigeria Administrative Report, 1933). Series of Ordinances were enacted in 1933 to back up the administrative reforms of Cameron. One of this was Native Authority Ordinance which empowered the Resident and the District Officer to reform and reorganizes the Native Administration. This ordinance was a marked improvement on the general ordinance on the subject as it repealed and reenacted most of its provision in a new form (Gailey, 1970).

Furthermore, the new Native Authority Ordinance was flexible as it recognized the fact that the various ethnic group in Nigeria exhibited varied local peculiarities. Hence, according to Gailey (1970), the ordinance facilitated “the establishment of widely divergent tribes of local government in different parts of Nigeria (NAK lokoprof. ... 254, 1934). In all, Donald Cameron’s call for reforms received wide publicity in Nigeria. Circular and memoranda from the office of the Chief Commissioner of Nigeria, G.S. Browne emphasized the need for administrative reforms (NAK. Kab. dist 2/857, 1934).

On the basis of various reports, Administrative reforms were introduced in 1934. This led to an extensive reorganization of the administrative structure in many Northern Provinces. For instance, in Benue Province, the Tivs were reorganized by merging Abinsi Division with the Tiv District formerly administered in Wukari to form a separate Tiv Division. In addition, kindred and clan councils were created (Craig, 1971). However, the local circumstances which influenced reforms in each region and provinces varied. It is from the above context that we shall examine the administrative reforms in Yagbaland. In 1934, ADO, A.R. Bailey was commissioned to conduct inquiries into the nature of native administration in Yagbaland and to submit a proposal plan for the reorganization of Yagba as a whole. Bailey’s reorganization plan was finally approved in April, 1934 (1934, NAK. 668/1934). The final report of Bailey’s inquiries changed the political map of Kabba province. Thereafter, Kabba province map was changed and enlarged in April 14, 1934, by the transfer from Ilorin province of West Yagba (our area of study) of Pategi Division of Ilorin province to Kabba Division of Kabba Province to join their ‘Kith and Kin’ (Yagba East) in Kabba Province to form Yagba District in Kabba Division with headquarters at Isanlu (NAK. 668/1934).

In conclusion, we have seen from this write up how Yagbaland experienced two genres of foreign dominations with varying degrees of exploitation and suffering they experienced from these alien rules. Though when the British came into the scene by flushing out the Nupe over-rule, their innovation of District head system attracted the odium of the Yagba people. This culminated into their protest march locally referred to as *Mokobon* which eventually led to the eradication of the District head system. The protest couple with other factors culminated to Sir Donald Cameron administrative reforms, which marched all the Yagba into one district in 1934.

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