

**COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION AND THE RE-ORGANIZATION OF
IGALA PRE-COLONIAL POLITICAL SYSTEM**

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ABSTRACT

Long before the advent of colonialism in Igala land, the Igala people were administered politically through various chains of administration. Power radiates from the central authority under the control of the Attah. This control trickled down to the various districts that were manned or controlled by the various chiefs (*Onuhs*). The chiefs (*Onuhs*) received instruction from the Attah and report back to him on regular basis. The Attah's authority was supreme until later in the 19th century when British colonial interest began to manifest in the land. With the manifestation of British colonial interest, the need to initiate a political system capable of sustaining modern political trends was evolved. As a result of the need for sustainability, the supremacy and authority of the Attah began to fizzle out owing in part to British colonial presence in the land and in another to some measure of support or collaboration with the British by some of the native chiefs who were dissatisfied with the authority of the Attah. The intrigues from some of the chiefs at the district level coupled with the creation of some administrative offices both at the centre and the outlying districts, political administration of the people were no longer the same. This paper is therefore focusing attention on the advent of colonialism and the re-organization of Igala political system for sustainable development during the Colonial period.

METHODOLOGY: In carrying out this study, the researcher relied mostly on oral traditions and account of various colonial administrators as documented in the archive and various other scholar's work.

Keywords: Igala, Colonial, Re-organization, Political system, Traditional, Chief, Native Authority.

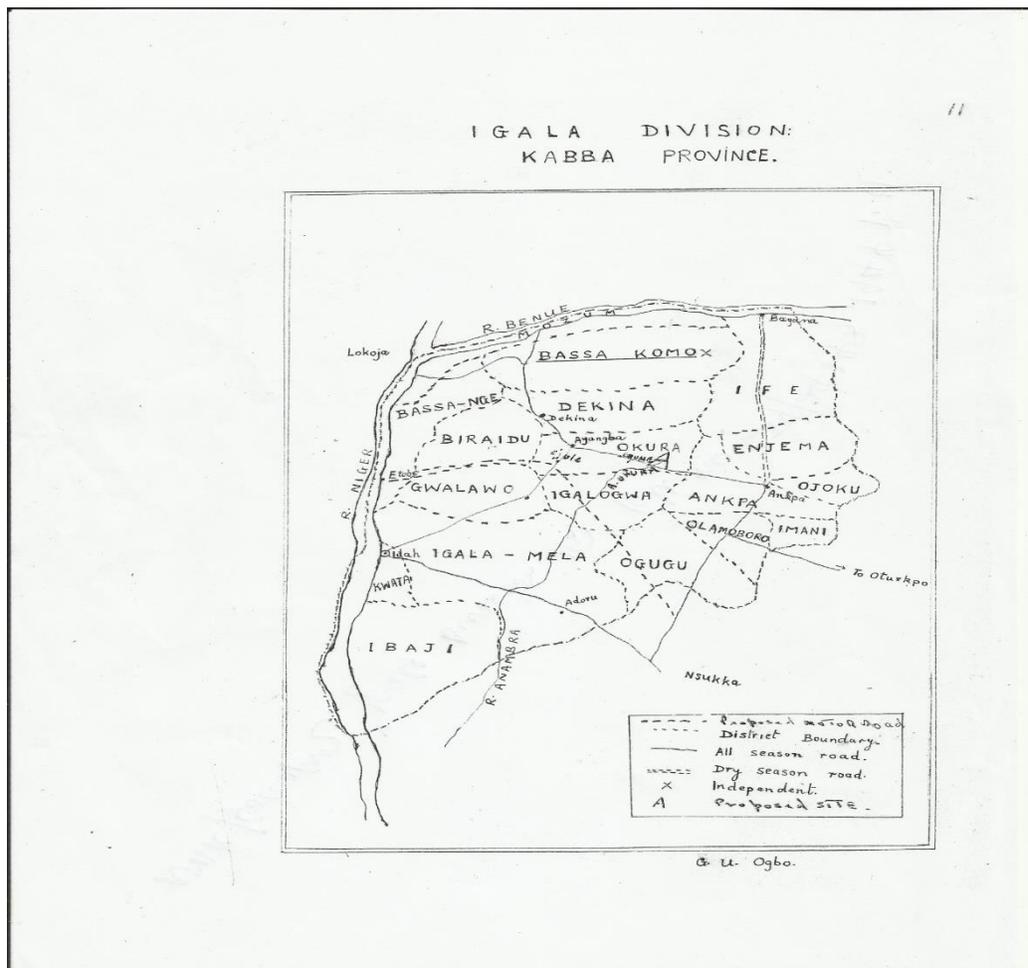
INTRODUCTION

Prior to the advent of British colonial administration in Igalaland, the Igala people who occupied a triangular tract of land on the eastern flank of rivers Niger and Benue were administered centrally from Idah the political headquarters of Igala people. The *Attah* was revered and held as both the secular and spiritual authority. Under him were members of his council who were predominantly members of the royal or ruling clans of Idah and the *Achadu*, while others were heads of the Igala - Mela clans. From the central body, the *Attah* dished out orders backed by the people's ancestral authorities to the *onuh*s in the outlying areas. This arrangement became necessary because of the increased size of the kingdom. This therefore calls for decentralization and devolution of power. According to Miles Clifford:

It was not humanly possible for the Ata to treat directly with an ever increasing tale of fief holders; the difficulty was met by the creation of a number of offices of state, ambassadors or as they are called councillorship, whose duty was to assist the Ata in the business of government and to represent him at the various outlying fiefs [sic] (Clifford, 1936, p.398).

These fief holders at the central level were the *Ochai-Attah*, *Odoma-Attah*, *Amana-Attah*, *Amakoji –Attah* and *Ohiemu-Ogbolo* each in charge of certain functions and responsible to the *Attah* (Clifford, 1936, p.398). While at the outlying districts and villages were a replication of what existed at the centre. At this levels were the *Onuh's* (chiefs) called *Amakomu-Attah* (Attah's mouth piece) and their councils which comprised *Achokolobia* (youth leaders) and various other smaller fief holders (Clifford, 1936, p.398). This traditional political arrangement was not in consonance with the modern trend of political development which the British seek to introduce at the period.

FIGURE 2: Map of Igala Land



Source: NAK/Loko Prof; "Igala Division HQ.", file no.234/24148, 1944, pg. 11

COLONIALISM AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY.

The coming of the British colonial administration changed or modified the existing system in favour of the British system of indirect rule. The essence of this was to fashion out a system of administration that could meet the need of sustainable development. Under this arrangement or to achieve this, *Attah's* power and influence were reduced because of dissension and intrigue on the part of the *Onuhs* (chiefs). But these were made worst under the British colonial administration who introduced various administrative positions that in reality were not directly answerable to the *Attah*. In the same vein, the division of the territories into various colonial provinces became a clear signal that the *Attah* in essence was gradually losing his political relevance in the outlying districts in favour of British colonial authority. (Clifford, 1936, p.398), indicates that:

The advent of the British Administration found the once flourishing Igala state riven with dissension and intrigue and, saving it in the nick of time from Fulani dominance proceed in its own way to hasten the disintegration. Idah with Adoru, Ojoko and Ibaji districts and part of Omata was placed under the protectorate government, the remainder being absorbed into northern Nigeria where the onus were effectually cut off from contact with their suzerain, whilst he himself was given no part in the administration of the moiety which had been left to him.

In realization of what they were losing under the direct administration of the southern province, and the advantages inherent in the indirect rule system as practiced in the north and other parts of Igalaland under the Northern Province, the *Attah* and his *Igalamela* chiefs protested to be joined to their kits and kins. This was granted and Attah gained his political roles again in 1918 under Sir, Richard Palmer, Lt. Governor of the Northern Province, but he was no longer absolute as was the case before. This was because the colonial administration placed him under check and at the same time created several administrative positions both in Idah and in the outlying districts, and even the heads of such administrative units were indirectly responsible to the colonial administration.

Between 1918 and 1930 when Mr. Clifford the District Officer granted Attah some measure of political authority over his subjects, the colonial administration instituted far reaching changes in the administration of Idah and the outlying areas. This period witnessed the creation of Native Authority (N.A.) councils, Resident Council, Districts headmen, village headmen, native courts (NAK/Lokoprof, 1941, p.3) and various other bodies that facilitated the execution of British colonial administrative policies. The creation of some of these bodies reduced the importance and power of the *Attah* over his people as he could no longer deal with them directly as he did before the colonial period. *Attah*, who saw himself as the representative of God on earth and therefore a divine ruler saw himself under the check of a foreign political authority (the colonial authority). This in essence, greatly undermined the power of *Attah*. In similar vein, the *onuh* at the district levels who before colonialism were somewhat or somehow independent except in some respects saw their power curtailed and placed under the checks of the British colonial authority. The colonial authority was saddled with the power to appoint their loyalists as was the case of Ankpa, Abocho and Dekina as District heads and not only that, they as well disciplined, removed or imprisoned any chief (*onuh*) found wanting in the discharge of his authority. This practice of appointing alien personalities into the administration of the area was in consonance with the practice of indirect rule system. In consonance with this practice, between 1906 and 1917 Ankpa District witnessed three non-natives as District head. For instance, in 1906 one Mallam Jibril was brought from Zaria as District head, in 1909 Sharafu Abu another Hausa man succeeded Jibril, while a Bassa-Nge man named Akanya from

Shintaku succeeded Sharafu, but was later removed for an indigenous person (Abdulkadir 2001, p. 1). Also, Abdulkadir gave an example of one Ahmodu, a Yoruba man and a member of West Africa Frontier Force who was made the *Onuh* Dekina from 1914-1918 (Abdulkadir 2001, p. 1). In similar circumstance, the political re-organization that was carried out was not restricted to the outlying districts and *Attah*'s royal councillors alone, but included the revitalization of the power and offices of the *Igalamela* chiefs. The reorganization of this body by the colonialists went beyond their re admission into the *Attah*'s council. They were made *Attah*'s representative and touring officers of the Igala Division. They also oversee the district administration as well as the native courts in all the outlying districts (NAK/Lokoprof, 1941, p.3). Though, not without shortcomings, they occupied and enjoyed such prerogatives until various *onuh*s (Chiefs) at the districts and village levels began to protest by refusing to present cases from their villages and also ignored the invitation to attend the native courts at the district headquarters. This was reflected in the over bearing power of the district heads in judicial matters. The *onuh*s (Chiefs) reacted, because they believed the powers and actions of the imposed district heads was an abdication of their ancient rights and in reaction petitioned to the Resident Officer in 1926 that, they (*Onuh*s) be allowed to have their courts and deal directly with the *Attah* without passing through the district heads since the arrangement was a necessity under the indirect rule system and therefore alien to the Igala native administration and judicial system (NAK/Lokoprof, 1941, p.3). Even though most of such petitions failed to elicit positive response as reflected in that of Ogane-Enigu, Egudi, Ojokiti, and Odoloko who petitioned to the District Officer Monsell in 1926 that they were no longer interested in following the District Head of Dekina (NAK/Lokoprof, 1941, p.4). In order to curtail the rising protest, the British colonial authority adopted an acceptable framework where the *Onuh*s (Chiefs) were given certain responsibilities. According to Resident Munshi Province, the policy so far adopted is to make use of certain *Onuh*s (Chiefs) putting them in charge of suitable groups to which they are acceptable and associating them with the administration of the district under the district head acceptable to them and the *Attah* (NAK/Lokoprof, 1943, p.1).

This however, confirms that the adoption of the Emirate political system was alien to the Igala people and so the imposition of alien personalities as either district heads or heads of Native Authority court system was systematically resisted by the Igala as they failed to co-operate with the alien District heads. This led to frustrations and ill-defined progress in Igala Native Authority administration. Miles Clifford the Resident officer clearly stated in the 1935 report to the Secretary Northern Province that:

The usual pattern of Emirate organization was in force and after several months of close touring it was obvious to me that this was artificial, as ill-suited and had as little prospect of success, as has proved to be the case in other pagan units submitted to a like experiment. The *Ata* and *Ashadu* (corresponding to Emir and Waziri) were concerned chiefly with intrigues against each other and the District Headmen, and with the sale of titles and offices they took little interest in the administration (NAK/Lokoprof, 1941, p.4).

Besides, the imposition of alien District Heads undermines the power of the *Onuh*'s (chief) who were made answerable to the alien district heads and so worked on the indigenous people to either scuttle colonial policies or create disharmony between the people and the administration. Clifford once reported that:

The District Headmen were in most cases alien to the Districts they administered (sic) and in some cases alien even to Igala. In the Districts, extortion, oppression and embezzlement were the rule rather than the exception, the courts were simply farcial

where they were not instruments of injustice and the lot of the peasantry can only be described as deplorable... The onus (hereditary fief holders) who were clearly the one positive influence had, save in a few cases, no part in the administration... (NAK/Lokoprof, 1941, p.4)

A careful study of these shortcomings revealed why the colonial administration overhauled the entire system, in order to record meaningful progress in the administration of Igalaland. Having observed the character of the *Attah*, his council members and those of the *onuh*s (chiefs) at the outlying areas, their lack of interest in certain matters and their over bearing attitude in certain other matters, the Resident Igala Division in a report to the Resident, Kabba Province in 1939, wrote that:

It appears to be true that we have been trying to form an efficient administration out of a religious hierarchy. Through his religious authority the Ata has immense power and there seems to be no reason why he should not make the administration work if he so desire. It further appears that he does not so desired but regards the administration as existing for his personal benefits. The rest of the administrative staff naturally inclined to take cue from him [sic] (NAK/Lokoprof, 1948, p.1).

The colonial administration came up with new ideas in 1940 aimed at further decentralizing the administration of Igala Division. In view of this, the Resident suggested a reduction in the number of the *onuh*'s (chiefs) which according to him were too many to allow for central authority dealing with all of them directly. The Resident also suggested the formulation of area councils under the chairmanship of the Resident Councilors and an increase in the number of courts (NAK/Lokoprof, 1948, p.1). However, all these were far from the desired aims of the administration. The *Attah* and his Council though benefited financially from the colonial administration in form of salaries and other benefits, they were still not ready to give up their resistance as exemplified in the various frustrations given to the successive Resident Divisional Officers. This led to the revocation of the Igala Native Authority in 1945 and in its place was an interim administrative officer in charge of Igala Division (NAK/Lokoprof, 1943, p. 1).

Furthermore, as a fall out of lack of cooperation from *Attah* and members of his council and the ineffective supervision of the outlying areas, the colonial administration not only revoked Igala Native Authority, but contemplated the relocation of Igala Division headquarters from Idah to Ataneguma (Ochaja), a relatively obscure and remote settlement on Okura cliff in 1945. But it should be noted that the intention of the British was not actually a genuine reason of bringing government closer to the people as they claimed, but an ill-intention of dislocating the people from the ancient practice which they termed cultic. The Resident Kabba Province D.M. Downes in a confidential report to the Secretary Northern Province gave centrality as a reason for the proposed removal of the headquarters from Idah. According to him:

The geographical position of Idah renders supervision by the District Officer and the Native Authority difficult. There is a tendency for the remote areas to ignore central control... Idah has from the days of the earliest observers had a sinister and evil reputation. The stagnant sleepy atmosphere of the place has an indescribable influence; it breeds intrigue and vice and in fact has persistently militated against good government (NAK/Lokoprof, 1948, p. 1).

The proposed relocation of the Igala Divisional headquarters from Idah to Atanegoma generated serious reactions from the *Attah* and some sections of the Igala people. In other words the proposal revealed some serious out burst from some aggrieved

Igala people. It also revealed some level of polarization inherent in Igala polity. A clear manifestation of this was while those from Idah areas were not happy with the proposal, those from Ankpa areas were fully in support of the relocation. Against this background, the *Attah's* council was re-organized in 1946. By 5th of September 1946 Mallam Ameh Oboni was installed as new Attah of Igala (NAK/Lokoprof, 1946, p. 20), after the death of Obaje Ocheje. His installation witnessed what appeared to be a radical reformation in the political administration in Igalaland. From this time attainment of elementary education and ability to communicate in Hausa language became a pre-requisite for the throne of the *Attah*. Also in line with the directive of the colonialist, membership of *Attah's* council was re-organized for the first time as non-Igala and non-members of the royal family were appointed into Attah's council at Idah. Similarly, the council members were raised from six to nine to accommodate more members and perhaps dissenting voices. This was instrumental to the reason why a Bassa-Nge and two persons from Ankpa and Dekina were appointed into *Attah's* council. Of the nine Councillors, four were Court Councillors while the remaining five were Departmental Councillors. One other radical departure from the past was the fact that the new *Attah* went contrary to existing status-quo by appointing only two direct relations of the *Attah* to the Council while three others were distantly connected to the royal house of Idah (NAK/Lokoprof, 1946, p. 20). This re- organization helped to mellow the ill feelings expressed by some sections of Igalaland.

Igalaland under the colonial administration also witnessed some measures of reform between 1952 and 1954. The administrative reforms carried out between 1952 and 1954 were aimed at restructuring the practice of Native Authority administration that excluded Chief, in favour of Chiefs- in-Council. This was in line with the Native Authority (Definition and function) Law of 1952 (Whitaker Jr, 1970, p. 271). The provision of this reform dictates that the *Attah* was expected to consult his council in vital and important matters of the Native Administration.²¹ This reform generally called the Local Government Reforms of 1952 (Whitaker Jr, 1970, p. 271), required the *Attah* and some Resident Councillors to ascent to certain policies agreed upon by the council before it was passed to the District officer for approval (Whitaker Jr, 1970, p. 271). The Local Government Reform also instituted the principle of election instead of selection into *Attah's* Council as against the former practice. As a result membership of the council was again increased from nine to fifty-two. In the enlarged membership of the council, an Executive Committee was established within the Council, the majority of members were district representatives. This arrangement was meant to check the authoritarian and excessiveness in the power of the *Attah* by members of the Council. This, in a way, helped to address the lingering complaints of marginalization by some sections of Igala kingdom. Likewise, the democratized system of representation gave the people a sense of belonging right from the village through the District to the central level. In spite of all the checks and balances instituted by the reason of the reform, the Attah and the Resident still remained the overseer of most important matters in the Igala kingdom especially issues that border on the traditions of the people.

Despite the various reforms enunciated by the British Colonial Authority the call for the relocation of the headquarters of Igalaland to Atanegoma continued unabated. Between the period of 1946 and 1952 when reforms were initiated, various petitions were written directly to the Resident Officer, Kabba province, and on the pages of print media by both the council and some Igala elites on the need to revert the earlier decision of the Colonial Authority to relocate the headquarters of the Igala kingdom. For instance, in 1948, the Acting Resident Mr. Shaw wrote in a confidential report to the Secretary Northern Province that he had “to report that the Ata Gala and council made representation to His Excellency that the removal of

headquarters from Idah to Atanegoma be reconsidered” (NAK/Lokoprof, 1948, p. 2). As a follow up to this memorandum the Association of Igala National Society in connivance with the four ruling houses of the *Attah* stool represented by S.O. Atagwoni and Anana Edime respectively used the opportunity offered by the visit of the Governor- General, Sir John Macpherson to Igala Division to express their grievance on the relocation of the Igala Division to *Atanegoma* in their welcome address. According to them:

The Igala know the *Ata* as their Lord and regard him as their tribal and natural ruler with his tribal institutions. From the early history of Igala, Idah has always been the seat of the *Ata*’Gala and some of his traditional beaded title holders, and has many sacred shrines which are worshipped daily that cannot be removed on any account...[sic] (NAK/Lokoprof, 1948, p. 3)

Though the colonial administration was not too comfortable with the people’s grievance as expressed directly and through the pages of print media, they were however forced to re-consider their move to relocate the headquarters of Igala Division from Idah.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION.

The findings from the above analysis indicated a society that was to a large extent dissatisfied by the dictatorial rule of traditional institution which in most cases failed to take into cognizance the feeling of the citizens. (Badejo and Ogunyemi, 1989, p. 183) rightly noted that “...these relics of by-gone instrument of oppression which are a constant reminder of uneven social development and sociological disunity in Africa are irrelevant to a society currently subject to objective laws of capitalism...”. This statement to a large extent reflected the level of social dislocation and upheavals noticed in some societies. The unholy and unequal relations between the Chiefs and their subjects generated some levels of non compromise and lack of support *Attah* faced even in the face of humiliation by foreign institution (the Colonialist). Some sections of the society appeared to have seen in a modern constitutional government an opportunity to vent their angers and dissatisfaction in an age long institution that created an unequal relationship in an “obscure tradition” that was coated with intimidation. Therefore, the lack of support from some quarters of Igalaland though appeared selfish in character but it epitomizes a situation of distrust and disloyalty from some group. This in a nutshell represented a clear cut support and admiration of a political system that is meant to meet the need of the period under which a sustainable political development can be guaranteed. On the other hand, it was also an aspect of indigenous resistance not only to the Colonialists but to an indigenous potentate.

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