

# Colonial Administrative Reorganizations and Inter-Group Relations in O’kunland

**Aduke Titilayo Ekundayo**

*Department of History and Diplomacy  
Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State, Nigeria*

---

## **Abstract**

*O’kunland experienced series of administrative changes from time to time. In the bid to find a workable administration for the area, the British colonial administrators moved from one administrative experiment to the other. With each administrative re-organization came the unintended problems of intrigues, rivalries, antagonism among hitherto peaceful communities. This paper documents the administrative changes since Nupe times with emphasis on the British colonial administrative reorganization in O’kunland, a politically segmentary society. Its context is the implications of the administrative restructuring on inter-group relations in the area. The objective of creating a larger polity out of O’kunland resulted in the creation of artificial “Royal Houses”. The paper argues that the imposition and recognition of one chief over and above the other, the creation of administrative centres gave rise to village consciousness. It concludes that the British administrative arrangements opened up a new dimension of mutual distrust as a factor of inter-group relations among O’kun People.*

## **Introduction**

Kabba Division or the O’kun Yoruba as they are popularly referred to (Obayemi A.: 1978:70), inhabits the most north-eastern part of Yoruba land, where the peoples of Yagba, Owe, Bunu and Ijumu are found. Unlike their counterparts in other parts of Yoruba land they have no centralized administration or government that commands and receives the allegiance of all the villages. No traditions of monarchism and therefore no ruling houses as in the classic case of Ife and Oyo. The village in the pre-colonial era was the highest administrative and

political unit; each had its own rules, organized its own affairs without reference to other villages. The elders who derived legitimacy from tradition managed the affairs. Democracy was the idea behind the government for it was believed that all members of the community should participate in the government either directly or through their leaders or representatives.

### **Interactions and Relationships**

As individualistic as the communities in the area might appear to be, there were interactions and relationships. In the absence of a centralized political system the age-grade institution was evolved everywhere in Kabba Division or O'kun land. This is a socio-political institution that cut across family or lineage ties. It cut across sections of the community taking the individual out of the particularistic framework of the clan and family thereby widening the scope of interactions in the society (Adalumo 1997:19).

Economic activities equally enhanced inter-group relations. The lineages tried to maintain peace and security which were crucial to the development of the economy. They ensured an uninterrupted production of goods and services. Agriculture was the main activity and it was on it that all other indigenous economic activities were set. As an itinerant trader (Olorunleke: I) declared, men were predominantly farmers, craftsmen and hunters while women were traders (olisowo) and producers of commodities like dye (*aro*), thread (*owu*), oil (*epo*), shea butter (*ori*), palm kernels and pottery (*isa*), which they took to the markets for sale. In the area of exchange women participated in both short and long distance trade within and beyond the borders of Kabba Division. The internal trade was encouraged because lineages, communities depended on one another for survival. Markets were held periodically, say at regular intervals of three, five or seven days and occasionally fortnightly. Villages were connected by foot paths to enhance exchange of products. The well-used long distance routes included that from Kabba through Bunu country linking Alele, Oboko, Okoin, Igun and finally terminating at Lokoja. Another passed through Egbe from Patigi linking Isanlu, Ejuku, Ife – Olukotun, Igbagun to Omuo in Akoko and thence to Lagos on the coast.

On this long distance routes, traders from lineages and communities on most occasions bounded themselves together in caravans. They formed trade guilds, which were under unwritten checks and balances of guild rules and regulations. Prominent among the articles of trade were the locally woven cloths such as *etu* and *kijipa*; palm products and kolanuts. Others were pots, potash, pepper and yams. In some of the principal markets like Isanlu, Egbe, Osele, Patigi, traders were stratified according to their products. The well-established markets in the area brought together peoples from different geographical locations thus helping to foster inter-group relations in the area.

Besides, inter-group marriages enhanced cordial relations in Kabba Division as citizens could and did marry from any part of the ethnic group. Also some communities had common deities. The *Oro* festival for instance was common to Iffe – Ijumu (Ufe), Iyamoye (Iya) and Ekinrin Adde. The Owe and Ayere people also had in common *Ebora Yeu* (national deity) festival during which food and other presents were exchanged. The young freeborn male citizens could be initiated into *Ebora Yeu* in either Ayere or Kabba (interview with Oba Gabriel Babalola, and Chief M. Oluyori). The practices showed that the societies in the area under study did not exist in isolation; they had cordial relationships even though each community continued to regard itself as politically and administratively distinct and separate.

### **The Beginning of Inequalities and Animisities**

Upon the decentralized and fragmented society came the imposition of Nupe hegemony in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. For consideration of time and space one cannot go into details but this has been thoroughly discussed by (Mason 1970; Apata 1985 and Ade Obayemi 1978). As (Obayemi 1978:65) argue, the expansionist policy of Nupe into this area and the consequent political imposition of Nupe rule was economically motivated. To consolidate economic interest and the payment of annual tribute to Bida, the establishment of an administrative control based on *Ogba* system became imperative. For administrative ease and collection of tribute, Kabba was divided into fief under *Ogba*. A fief comprised a number of autonomous scattered communities with no tradition of political and administrative associations before Nupe era. The fief holders who did not reside in

the territories appointed their own *Ogba* (local rulers) who were loyal and directly responsible to them. “The appointment of individual to exercise responsibility beyond its own mini-states was an innovation in the political history of the O’kun.” (Obayemi, 1978).

The powers of these loyal indigenous rulers like Obaro Aragere (Ariere), Mokelu, and Obaro Gbaiyero in the period between 1860 and 1897 were strengthened and extended beyond their traditionally prescribed areas of jurisdiction to cover non-Owe groups of Ayere, Ogidi, Iffe (Ufe), Aduge and Gbedde. The supervision and collection of tribute in these areas became the *Obaro’s* responsibility. Uncooperative rulers were reduced to insignificance with no part to play under Nupe administration. In Ayere for instance, rulers like Olukeu, Ekudina I and Olumodeji were hostile to the Nupe and so were rendered useless in the new political situation. Thus began the creation of inequalities whereby some rulers were favoured and others were disadvantaged.

In Yagba land the “Ajeles” who were tax over-seers resided in important centres (towns) like Egbe, Ejuku, Isanlu for the purpose of tribute collection. Rather than having independent villages, Yagba villages were made to recognize the aforementioned towns. The position of the *Obaro* vis-à-vis the non-Owe group mentioned above was another case in point. The collection centres such as Egbe, kabba, Ejuku and others, though created strictly for economic reasons, invariably became power centres because the *Ogba* who holds the reign of power resided in them. This unintended act of Nupe (creation of political leaders, administrative and collection centres), marked the beginning of acrimony, problems and inter-group rivalry in the area. The policy favoured some places and people and put some at disadvantaged position.

### **Colonial Arrangements and Changes in Administrative Patterns**

It was as a ‘deliverer’ from Nupe hegemony that the British came to O’kun land in 1897 and gradually took over the entire area. As (Apata 1985:92-103) rightly stated, by 1906, the provinces were fairly stable and the four Divisions of Kabba Province vis: Lokoja, Kotonkarfe, Okene and Kabba were created. With the creation of the divisional

system, the British administration was brought closer to the people. As noted earlier Kabba Division had no central administration in the classic of Oyo or the emirate in the North, so they could not be organized along the emirate model. As a colonial annual report in 1913 indicated, the Lugardian proposal to end the political segmentation and enhance centralization in this historically autonomous and self-governing communities:

Was to endeavour to find a man of influence as chief and to group under him as many villages or districts as possible, to teach him to delegate powers, and to take an interest in his Native Treasury, to support his authority and to inculcate a sense of responsibility. (NAK. SNP 10:1 97P/1913).

In Kabba Division therefore the approach was the introduction of a single-chief system (District system and later the Emirate model) in place of the existing multitude of chieftains. The rationale for creating Districts / District Heads was to build up a centralized system of administration so that the numerous autonomous, scattered and self-governing communities were brought under a District Head. Among Yagba sub group, three village-groups emerged in 1914: Isanlu village group comprising Isanlu Makutu, Isanlu Mopo, Idofin, Ilafin, Irunda and Amuro Odo; Mopa village-group was made up of Mopa, Orokere, Aiyeteju, Agbajogun, Oke-Agi, and Ilae. Lastly was Ife-Ejuku village-group comprising Ife-Olukotun, Ponyan, Jege, Ogbom and Alu. The village head of Isanlu (Arungbemi); Mopa (Oaju Aloko) and Ife-Olukofun (Ajibola Asejogba) became the spokesman for their respective sub-districts.

In Bunu sub-section, the villages of Iluke, Alele, Olle, Oke-Onyi (Okoin), Oboko, Apaa, Iseke, Woha (wawa), Kowaapasa and the Kirri group were all placed under the leadership of Ampitan. All these together with the villages of Gbedde came under Balogun Olumudi of Kabba. The people were brought together in new groupings, and for new purposes.

By this arrangement in O’kunland’ petty chiefs were being abolished, settlements were made subordinate one to the other quite out of tune

with traditional practice; communities were broken up into administrative units without reference to the wishes of the peoples and groups concerned. More still was the fact that the arrangement raised the status of a particular village or clan head to a point at which he could be regarded as superior to those with whom he had shared equal status in pre-British days. Some chiefs like *Obaro* of Kabba, Oju Aloko of Mopa and their towns became advantaged against others thus creating envy, tension and resultant strife, among hitherto peaceful communities.

To further pursue a deliberate policy of bringing people together, another major administrative arrangements based on the Emirate model emerged in Kabba in 1918. This was sequel to the report of the Lt. Governor of Northern Provinces, H.S. Goldsmith in 1917 that “there was no Native Administration possessing any extensive or real authority in Kabba Division.” (NAK Loko Prof: Kabba Province Annual Report 1917). The idea was to evolve a real Native Administration, which would compare favourably with those of the Northern emirates, cheap to maintain with every possibility to administer the diverse ethnic groups centrally.

By this arrangement, the three sub-districts of Isanlu, Mopa and Ife-Olukotun were merged into one district under the district headship of the Olukotun of Ife, Ajibola Asejogba 1 with headquarters at Ife-Olukotun. Bunu villages came under the district headship of Olu of Kirri Ampitan with headquarters at Olle, while Gbedde group was under the District Head of Oludoi of Otungbedde with headquarters at Gbedde. All the Districts were brought under the *Obaro* of Kabba, Gbaiyero Ajibohokun, as paramount chief with administrative headquarters at Kabba. Worthy of note is that the Native Court and the Native Treasury were sited at Kabba. This was in the bid to centralize the administration and to elevate the *Obaro* to a position comparable to the emirs in the north. For effective operation, the powers of the *Obaro* were built up at the expense of other leaders for the purpose of serving as sole Native Authority. He became the president of the court at Kabba and had overriding say in all matters. He ratified the appointment of village heads in his enlarged domain. Taxes collected from all the districts were brought to him at Kabba. As (Anene, J.C 1970:175) argued, the creation of these administrative courts:

Involved the elimination of separate identity of the traditional coast states and was in fact the beginning of the artificial division of the territory into administrative units which cut across the traditional groupings of the various communities.

This idea of a paramount chief had significant repercussion on inter-group relations. A large area came under the *Obaro* of Kabba. Before 1918 his jurisdiction covered just an area of 1,690 sq.km and a population of 1,728, comprising Kabba town and immediate surrounding Owe villages including Odolu. With Yagba, Bunu and Gbedde becoming subordinate districts in 1918, he now controlled a territorial extent of 6,894sq.km and a population of 29,550 (see NAK Loko Prof. Acc 26 – Kabba Division Annual Report 1918; and NAKLoko Prof 2668 / 1917: Kabba District Amalgamation). By practical implication, the institutions of the District headship and the “Emir” (paramount chief) and the personalities which occupied same had duties and privileges which were not only controversial but enviable, causing a lot of resentment and opposition. “Inferior chiefs” became subordinate to superior chiefs as the District Heads were now directly answerable to the *Obaro* whose power and authority became unparalleled in the history of the Division. Village heads became only auxiliary instruments - agents for the collection of taxes, raising labour for work on the roads – with no power of their own. Progressively they lost their traditional authority.

### **Reactions to the New Patterns of Administration**

Writing on inter-group relations (Obaro I., 2006: 97) declared “In terms of inter-group relations, colonial rule was something of a paradox: on the one hand, it brought Nigerian peoples together in new groupings and for new purposes; on the other, it emphasized already existing differences and introduced new ones.” Indeed, in Kabba Division, existing differences were emphasized and new ones were introduced. The colonial policy of substantial difference in salary between a District Head and other village heads became a constant source of envy and resentment from the other village heads who in all respect and by all standards were co-equals to the appointed District Head. For instance, the District head of East Yagba Oba Ajibola

Asejogba 1, earned £100.00 (₦200.) per annum in 1918 while Iwalaiyi, the village head of Lukekere earned just £12.00 (24.00) per annum (NAK LokoProf: Acc 26). This was often rejected. Given the extensive powers and privileges of the District Heads, squabbles frequently ensued at the District level over their appointments. In 1928 serious opposition from Amuro, Isanlu, Ejuku, Ife-Olukofun greeted the appointment of Ooju Aloko of Mopa whom his other colleagues described as highhanded.

The other villages pressed for the official recognition of their traditional heads and demanded that the Sub-district council headship and the court be rotated. To press home their demands the council meetings held under the auspices of Aloko in 1934 were boycotted (NAK Kabba District 2/8:57: Yagba District, Reorganisation of 1934). Despite the fullest support given by the colonial administrators to the Olukotun of Ife during his tenure as District head, the rivalries that characterized his tenure rendered him as mere figurehead. Orders given by him were not readily obeyed. As noted earlier, historically the *Obaro* was merely the head of Owe and prior to British rule, Bunu, Gbedde and Yagba were never subject to him. The new position, powers and privileges conferred on him generated the anti-*Obaro* or anti-Kabba move. The struggle to secede from same became particularly pronounced and wide spread among the Gbedde and Bunu people. The people expressed displeasure with their stay under Kabba in series of statements and protests to the colonial authorities. For instance, Ogidi people embarked on an indefinite boycott of the court at Kabba beginning from 1922 and also mobilized the support of the people of Aduge and Ogale for self-government (NAK. Kabba District 3/1/316). Relations between Kabba and Bunu and Ijumu were further negatively conditioned because of the policy of combined treasury at Kabba. This bred a lot of resentment on the part of Ijumu who felt that the policy left them under the continued economic exploitation of Kabba.

The District Headquarters as well as the Divisional Headquarter (Kabba) were by no means left out in the colonial process of centralization as they became power centres. Colonial facilities and institutions – the Native Courts and the District Council Chambers were all sited there. Thus, the District Headquarters and Divisional



Headquarters became centres of attractions and envy for other towns not so privileged or favoured. During official visits and tours by the Residents and District officers, it was usual for people and their leaders from other villages to meet them at the various Headquarters. What was more meetings of the District Council and court proceedings were held at the District Headquarters. This entailed regular trips by the members of the two bodies to the headquarters particularly Kabba, a distance of not less than 100km, 70km and 50km from Egbe, Isaulu and Mopa respectively. Reluctance in most cases was demonstrated by absenteeism at the courts. The balance of advantage was tilted in favour of Kabba and against Ijumu, Bunu and Yagba.

The *Obaro* as well as the District Heads were now protected from the traditional principles of “Checks and Balances” operation in the indigenous setting. They could not be removed from office, as they were answerable to the colonial officers and not the people as the case was in pre-colonial times. While it could be argued that in the pre-colonial O’kun land there was some form of centralized administration through the fiefs, the functionaries (Ogba), who wielded the centralized powers, were however all Nupe appointees and not former local equals. This innovation in the colonial setting was therefore resentful to the people. The strong opposition from the people to the exercise, followed by series of complaints to the Lt. Governor (for details see N.A.K. Loko Prof: 326/1922. Reorganization of Independent Tribes in Kabba Province), led to the collapse of the system in 1922. The Lt. Governor recommended in October 1922 that the various chiefs should regain their independence because of their serious complaints (Ibid).

### **Conclusions**

The British system of local government arrangements engendered strife and bitterness as it brought peoples together without taking into account the peoples traditional socio-political systems. As the British moved from one administrative arrangement to the other in Kabba Division so were changes and tensions introduced into the polity. It was the historical circumstances of the Nupe era that made Kabba town, Ejuku, Egbe, Isanlu collection centres among villages that had

hitherto been equals. The British recreated this by picking the *Obaro* arbitrarily as paramount Chief over all others in O'kun land, thus introducing new inequalities into the inter-group relations in the area.

The present uneasy relations between Kabba and Ijumu; Egbe and Ere, Ejuku and Ponyan; Ponyan and Ife-Olukotun; Mopa and Isanlu to mention just a few reveal the gravity of this undying tension and bitterness. Problems carried over to post colonial times, for example, Mopa was as friendly as possible with Isanlu before colonial days. At a time Isanlu became prominent as the headquarters of East Yagba with Native Court and Treasury. Mopa being the seat of missionaries in the colonial days enabled her to produce greater number of educated elite. This elite hold strategic positions and could get things (socio-economic facilities) located in Mopa which should have been sited at the supposed headquarters; hence, the continuous rivalries between the two. Similar soured relationship is noticeable between Odo-Ere and Egbe whereby the later continuously made her influence to prevail over principles. The population of an area, the status of its chiefs, and the number and position of its educated elites now determine which area or town is prominent and paramount.

Political intrigues and rivalry, which accompanied the selection of paramount chiefs (a colonial political institution) in colonial days, has lingered to the post-colonial days. Despite the rotational principles that was established by the chiefs and elders of East Yagba in 1929 after the election of Chief Aloko as the second paramount Chief, till 1972 no paramount chief has come from Ponyan, Amuro and some other villages in East Yagba. On June 12, 1972, the Military Governor of Kwara State announced the appointment of Chief A.O. Molade of Mopa and Usman Atobatele II of Ife-Olukotun as paramount chiefs of North East and South East Yagba respectively. If the rotational principle was adhered to, these appointments should have come from Amuro and Ejuku respectively. This further strained the relationship between these communities. Over the years from 1897 to the present, relations amongst groups in O'kun land has been marred. Though there is no open clash or confrontation, intrigues still prevail. The antagonism and unhealthy rivalries are problems generated and carried over from the colonial administrative re-organizations.

## References

- Adalumo, A.T., "A Socio-Political History of Kabba Division, 1900 – 1976," Ph.D Thesis, University of Ilorin, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Problems of Colonial Administrative Re-organizations in East Yagba, 1900 – 1934," B.A. Long Essay, University of Ibadan 1980.
- Ade-Ajayi, J.F and Alagoa, E.J; "Nigeria before 1800: Aspects of Economic Development and Inter-group Relations" in Obaro Ikime ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann Books, 1980.
- Ade Obayemi; "The Sokoto Jihad and the O'kun Yoruba: A Review" *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* (JHSN), Vol. 9, No.2, 1978 pp 61 – 87.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "States and Peoples of the Niger Benue Conference Area" in *Groundwork of Nigerian History*.
- Anene, J.C. *The International Boundaries of Nigeria*, Longman, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Southern Nigeria in Transition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1966.
- Apata Z. O. "Administrative Changes in the Old Kabba Province of Northern Nigeria, 1897 – 1939." Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ife, Ile Ife, July 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "The Ogba System, a Study of Nupe Imperialism in the North-East Yorubaland, 1840 – 1897." *ALORE: Journal of Humanities, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin*, vol.1, 1984.
- Ikime, O, *History, the Historian and the Nation*, Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books, 2006.
- Mason, M. "The Nupe Kingdom in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: A Political History." Ph.D Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1970.

## Archival Materials

- National Archive Kaduna (NAK) SNP 10: 97P/1913.
- NAK LokoProf: Kabba Province Annual Report 1917.
- NAK LokoProf Acc 6: Kabba District Annual Report 1918.
- NAK LokoProf 2668/1917: Kabba District Amalgamation of.

NAK LokoProf: 326/1922, Reorganization of Independent Tribes in Kabba Province.

NAK Kabb District 2/8/57: Yagba District Reorganization of 1934.

### **Interviews**

Interview with Oba Gabriel Babalola, Olu Adde of Ekinrin Adde at Ekinrin, 22/2/1990.

Interview with Pa. Isaac Olorunleke, at Effo Amuro, 24/4/1990.

Interview with Chief M.O. Oluyori at Kabba, 22/2/1990

Interview with Madam Anugabo, Effo Amuro, 23/4/1990.