

# A RE-ASSESSMENT OF AFONJA'S ROLE IN OYO-ILORIN RELATIONS IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

\*Dr Erinosh Timothy O

## Abstract

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a period of turbulence particularly in Yorubaland, South-Western part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, West Africa. The period marked an epoch as it finally witnessed the collapse and disintegration of the most powerful pre-19<sup>th</sup> century empire created by the Oyo, an off-shoot of the Yoruba race. The Old Oyo Empire scattered and the cause of this sad event has been attributed to the military career of the last *Aare-OnaKakanfo* (*Aare* forshort) or Field Marshal Afonja, of the once dreaded polity with Katunga or Oyo Ile, being its seat of power. Afonja was said to have paved the way for the successful incursion of the Fulani *ihadists* into Yorubaland particularly Ilorin, which was Afonja's stronghold. Thus, Afonja laid the foundation of Oyo-Ilorin relations by defecting from the control of *Alaafin* or ruler of the Old Oyo Empire. He has been castigated as a traitor and a selfish ambitious adventurer. However, this study is of divergent opinion to the well celebrated pundits many of those who believe(d) that Afonja betrayed his political overlord, the *Alaafin*. It is against this backdrop that the military/political career of *Aare* Afonja is examined regarding Oyo-Ilorin relations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century taking into cognizance the circumstances that surrounded the period under study with specific reference to Yorubaland. This is therefore a departure from the existing writings which paint the warrior-statesman as a villain.

**Keywords:** *Aare-OnaKakanfo* Afonja, Old Oyo Empire, Ilorin, Yorubaland, Power politics, Oyo-Ilorin relations

## Introduction

State creation involves the use of force as states themselves are organized violence. No nation builders in the ancient world existed without employing military action to suppress their neighbours as state formation was/is a demonstration of imperialistic tendencies. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010) conceptualizes imperialism as "a system in which a country controls other countries, often after defeating them in a war" (752). In his own contribution, Chikendu (2004) observes that the phenomenon called imperialism is "a form of state behaviour found in one way or another in all ages. It has different forms and characteristics and propelled by different motives...such as dynastic rivalry, the need to ward off predatory and marauding tribes..." (p. 1).

---

\* Senior Lecturer, Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagan, Ogun State

This implies that imperialism, whether ancient, classical or modern accounts for the existence of states, kingdoms, empires and indeed, the modern nation-states or countries are a by-product of imperialism. It therefore follows that *real politik* or application of naked force was/is inherent in imperial ambition. Power politics is highly exhibited and the pre-colonial African societies were not precluded from such adventurous political engagement. Consequently, there arose some powerful kingdoms across the continent among which was the Old Oyo, the subject of this discourse.

The Old Oyo became the watchdog of all Yorubaland during its hey days. With superb administrative machinery, resilient and gallant military formation, shrewd and warlike rulers, and sound economy based on agriculture, trade and commerce as well as works of art, Old Oyo Empire sent jitters to the spine of Yoruba enemies (Atanda, 2007). It was unfortunate that by the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the once awesome and vibrant polity was tottering due largely to the breakdown of central authority which accentuated the Fulani *jihadists'* in-road which ultimately spelt a doom to the continuous existence of the empire. It must be stated that a good military strategist must always seek a way of surviving when helmed up in a war zone. This is exactly what informed Afonja's actions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the provincial governor of Ilorin. Having realized that he was targeted for elimination in the power politics that traumatized the Old Oyo, he had no option than to engage in strategies aimed at self-preservation. Unfortunately, Afonja has been blamed by many historians for being largely responsible for the tragedy that befell Old Oyo (Boahen 1980, p, 97; Webster *et al* 1980, p. 64; Akinjogbin, 1981, pp. 322-323; and Ajayi 1984, p. 143). This academic interrogation therefore critically examines the power politics that actually led to the fall of the Old Oyo, makes an in-depth appraisal of the personality and military/political career of *Generalismo* Afonja underscoring that the man was an astute military strategist rather than being a villain or betrayer. The nature of Oyo-Ilorin relations before and after the elimination of Afonja with a conclusion, similarly receive our attention.

### **Prelude to the Collapse of Old Oyo Empire**

The collapse and final disintegration of the Old Oyo were accelerated by a chain of events. Before then, *Alaafin* Abiodun with the support of the *Aare Ona Kakanfo* Oyabi of Ajase, *Basorun* Gaha was overthrown and killed while his (Gaha's) kinsmen and supporters were not spared (Asiwaju and Law, 1985, p. 451). Abiodun died in 1789 and his death brought woes and calamities to the already sick polity under the rulership of *Alaafin* Awole. Unfortunately, the new ruler fell out with *Basorun* Asamu and *Aare Ona Kakanfo* Afonja; these and other chieftains greatly facilitated the erasure of Old Oyo Empire from the political map. This was as a result of their activities which were inimical to the health of the empire. As Oguntomisin (2002) has noted, Oyo chiefs particularly some members of *Oyomesi*, resumed the struggle for power after *Alaafin* Abiodun and "they resorted to usurping the prerogatives of the *Alaafin*" (p. 228). The first was *Basorun* Asamu who arrogated power to himself by seizing a *Qur'an* belonging to Alajaete. The owner, Alajaete was a Muslim trader in the Old Oyo's capital (Katunga). *Alaafin* Awole, having suspected that the *Basorun* was privy to the disappearance of the *Qur'an* because he disapproved of the propagation of Islamic religion in the city, queried his prime minister who was given a marching order to retrieve the book. However, the *Basorun* turned a deaf ear to his sovereign's directive. The deviant behaviour of *Basorun* Asamu alarmed the *Alaafin* who was credited with the following statement:

Is it come to this that my commands cannot be obeyed in my own capital/ must it be said that I failed to redress the grievance of a stranger in my town? That he appealed to me in vain? Very well then. If you *Basorun* Asamu cannot find it my father/Sango the defied *Alaafin*, god of thunder/ will find the *Koran* for me. (228)

The following day, the *Basorun*'s house was totally raised by fire and this incident angered Asamu and thereby became the *Alaafin*'s enemy. This arose because of the efficacy attached to Sango who was reputed to take vengeance on thieves and liars by burning their houses. Thus "great was his rage against the king for being instrumental in convicting him of theft and lying" (Johnson, p. 190). The *Basorun*'s

defiance to execute *Alaafin*'s instruction was considered an affront to the *Alaafin*'s authority and a calculated attempt to demonstrate that the monarch was weak, powerless and incapable of protecting strangers within his domain (Oguntomisin, p. 228).

Another clear evidence that the *Alaafin* had lost total control of the central administration was displayed by another chief called Lafianu, the *Owota*, one of the seventy *Eso*, praetorians guards or war captains. He arrogated to himself the power to shield or protect a condemned criminal, that is, the possession of prerogative of mercy. In the government of the Old Oyo, it was the *Alaafin* who possessed this power to pardon convicted culprits in the domain. The transgressor was one Jankalawa who had fled to Borgu – a neighbouring kingdom – to avoid being executed by the late *Alaafin*, Awole's predecessor. But after the king's death, Jankalawa returned to Oyo capital and walked freely along the streets because of the protection he enjoyed from *Owota* Lafianu. This incident infuriated the late king's wives who complained to *Alaafin* Awole. According to Johnson in his reportage the queens said:

You have inherited our late husband's wives, his treasures, slaves and his throne. Why not make his cause your cause and his enemies yours as well? Why do you allow this Jankalawa to stalk so defiantly about the streets of Oyo (190-191).

The passionate appeal moved the *Alaafin* who summarily ordered the arrest and immediate execution of Jankalawa. But the *Owota* was aggrieved that he was not consulted before somebody under his protection was got ridden of. Consequently, the *Basorun* (Asamu) and the *Kakanfo* found an accomplice in the powerful *Owota*. A conspiracy was formed but not being ripe for execution, they awaited a favourable opportunity (p. 191). The issue of the *Kakanfo* (Afonja) shall be treated later.

There was apparently widespread disaffection in the subordinate towns of the empire which were groaning under the oppressive over- lordship of the *Alaafin* who were represented by the rapacious and wicked *Ilari*. This disaffection was "perhaps in part of consequences of rising levels of taxation, necessitated by the fall in revenues according to the *Alaafin* from the slave trade in the 1790s"

(Asiwaju and Law, p. 451). However, it is imperative that these scholars seem to have blown the centrality of slave trade to the Oyo economy out of proportion since the polity had been experiencing decay before the abolition of the slave trade. The crux of the matter is that the empire had benefitted from the commercial links it had established with the north via the trans-Saharan trade. Through it the Oyo had imported horses, rock-salt, potash, shear butter, milk, kola nuts and livestock. However, the collapse of the central authority dealt a deadly blow to the Oyo Empire resulting in its economic decline. As Boahan (1980) graphically captures the situation:

The assertion of independence by Nupe, the collapse of central authority and the Fulani conquest and occupation of not only Nupe but also of northern Yorubaland and the consequent instability led to the dislocation of the traditional trade with the north. (p. 97)

The implication of the breakdown of Oyo's central administration was its inability to curtail cracks in its political edifice spear headed by emergent and angry warlords of the conquered territories. As Ajayi (1984) has confirmed, the crisis-ridden central authority as being responsible for the sudden collapse of Oyo has this to say:

The argument...is that this rather sudden collapse of the Oyo monarchy and widespread rebellion were the culmination of a deep-rooted and long-standing struggle for power between the *Alaḥin* and various groups of supporters on the one hand and lineage chiefs, provincial rulers and military leaders on the other; and that the struggle concerned the effective control of the kingdom and empire, an issue that was under and much more fundamental than the control of the slave trade (p. 141).

Back to the chiefs at the capital, *Basorun* Asamu and *Owota* Lafianu and other notable chiefs became incorrigible and would not submit to the authority and power of the *Alaḥin*. According to Oguntomisin:

Instead of recognizing the limit of their power, they accused the *Alaḥin* of humiliating them in the exercise

of his authority. Swayed by the notion that the *Alaafin* was becoming too powerful, the chiefs sought to undermine the former's authority rather than cooperate with him in the running of the affairs of the empire (p. 229).

The final straw that broke the camel's back was the support they (the chiefs) received from *Aare Ona Kakanfo* Afonja. This spelt a doom to the Old Oyo Empire as the once vibrant and formidable polity broke into municipalities and small political camps. This leads us to the Afonja's saga and his military exploits.

### **Afonja's Career and the Oyo-Ilorin Political cum Military Relations**

Before examining the central character, Afonja, it is germane to note that there had been relationship between the Old Oyo Empire and Ilorin. As noted earlier, several towns and villages were incorporated into Oyo Empire with their local or provincial rulers owing allegiance to the *Alaafin* as their overlord. The existence of peace, law and orderliness that permeated the domain led to the founding of several settlements outside the nucleus of the empire by adventurous Oyo individuals, both hunters and farmers. One of such settlements was Ilorin which is believed to have been created or established by Laderin one of the Old Oyo hunters (Joshua 2011, 24).

At this juncture, it is important to note that inter-group relations, or the series of contacts between different states or peoples, usually in form of trade, diplomacy, management of trade routes, boundaries as well as war and peace (conflict resolution). The need for inter-groups relations in the pre-colonial era was to enjoy good neighbourliness. Towards achieving this, a society or community had to recognize the territorial integrity of others with which it shared boundaries and even beyond. Thus, a society or state "would have to promote peaceful relations through trade, intermarriages and the establishment of diplomatic relations" (Joshua, 1).

Prior to the emergence of modern states and international system, international relations and diplomacy that featured among pre-colonial Nigerian communities were known as inter-group relations which preceded the intrusion of the Europeans into their country. The issue of external relations was a must as no single human collectivity can

live in isolation, having nothing to do with its neighbours. While stressing the importance of relations among human societies, Ajetunmobi cited by Joshua says that the relations with one another in the society reflected in the existence of family life, corporate group existence, and the development of many social institutions – religious, political, economic and social which exist as an avenue for intra and inter-group social relations (p. 2).

Whether a community likes it or not it has to relate with her neighbours, either for good or evil. By geographical imperative, states or empires in the olden days interacted. In addition, economic interdependence compelled the pre-colonial polities to interact either by establishing trade contacts through diplomatic relations or by subjugating weak and inferior palatinates and annex their domains in order to satisfy the economic aspirations of the stronger and imperialistic polities. This is otherwise referred to as expansionist policy.

The Old Oyo Empire maintained inter-group relations with other Yoruba sub-groups and non-Yoruba communities. The relationship between the Oyo and Ilorin people before Afonja's revolt was that of a father-son relationship since Ilorin was an off-shoot of the Old Oyo, founded by its own son, the hunter that established it. But events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned out to portray a relationship in which the son now declaring himself independent unilaterally and also to the destruction of the father and his political estate. The question that arises is: who was this Afonja, the architect of this military coup that rocked the Old Oyo to its foundations and why taking such decision and action?

Laderin, the founder of Ilorin was succeeded by his son called Pasin who was in turn succeeded by Alagbin, the father of Afonja, who later emerged as the *Aare Ona Kakanfo*. It is essential to debunk the argument of some writers who had regarded Afonja as “a slave-born child of the royal family who had risen to become *Kakanfo*, or commander of the Oyo army” (Webster, Boahen and tidy, 1980, p. 64). It is true that the *Eso* who were under the authority of the *Kakanfo* were appointed from among the slaves in order to ensure their neutrality in the politics of the land. But their slave origin became obscured; “they developed an *spirit de corps* of their own and gained recognition as a highly respected nobility, next in rank to the *Oyo Mesi*, whom they now

assisted, and sometimes rivalled, in the administration of the wards of the capital city” (Ajayi, pp. 140-141). Moreover, Afonja was a prince who contended for the *Alaafin’s* throne after the death of Abiodun. His rival was Awole. Indeed, this princely root or antecedent of Afonja is well captured by Oguntomisin: He (Afonja) was not selected as *Alafonja* because, being related to the royal family through his mother, he was not qualified traditionally to the throne (p. 229).

The royal link of Afonja is further substantiated by renowned Nigerian historians who are well versed in the history of Oyo. These are the late Emeritus Professor J.F. Ade Ajayi, Professor G.O. Oguntomisin and Emeritus Professor A.I. Asiwaju while writing in conjunction with Robin Law. As Ajayi has pointed out, “the *Kakanfo* became an office to which an ambitious prince like Afonja, who lost the contest for the throne, chose to be appointed” (p. 140). His appointment was historic in the sense that “contrary to Oyo convention, he pressurized *Alaafin* Awole to appoint him as the *Are-Ona-Kakanfo*” (Oguntomisin, p. 229). In their own writing, Asiwaju and Law concretize that royal blood ran in the veins of Afonja. According to them:

Abiodun’s successor Awole was foolish enough to quarrel both with the Basorunand with the *Are-Ona Kakanfo*, who was now Afonja of Ilorin...

Afonja, who was related to the royal lineage of Oyo, was persuaded to support a rebellion against Awole, on the understanding that he would be chosen to succeed him as *Alafin*. (p. 451)

These illustrations affirm or refute the writings of Webster and his colleagues.

The emergence of Afonja as Oyo’s *Generalismo* or Field Marshall sent jitters to the spine of *Alaafin* Awole who was aware that he was sitting on a keg of gun power with Afonja serving as his commander-in-chief. He was therefore looking for a way to get rid of his avowed enemy. Awole was convinced that Afonja could disregard his (*Alaafin’s*) authority and that the new *Aare* could ally with other rebellious powerful chiefs in the empire and destroy him. As a result, relying on the advice of his courtiers, Awole secretly plotted to eliminate Afonja. By Oyo’s convention, and *Are Ona Kakanfo* must not fail to achieve victory in a military campaign within three months. The penalty



or punishment for failure is death through suicide. Awole decided to employ this convention against his *Kakanfo* who he subsequently ordered to mobilize his troops and attack Iwere-Ile. This was a well-fortified town which, Awole knew, Afonja could not subdue and capture within three months. But Awole was crafty by officially instructing Afonja to lead his troops to attack Igbeji while the royal escorts were secretly told to direct him to Iwere-Ile. With this plot, Awole was sending the army and its chief captain on a suicide mission which would lead them into their early graves.

Afonja and his army were saved by the leakage of the plan. He therefore revolted against *Alaafin* at Iwere-Ile. This rebellion took place in c.1797 and *Kakanfo* Afonja was aided by the *Basorun*, the provincial rulers like the *Onikoyi*, war chiefs like the *Owota* (an *Eso*) and Chief Opele of Gbogun (Ajayi, p. 141). These distinguished personalities dealt with the royal escorts whom they massacred and Afonja besieged Oyo-Ile with his troops instead of attacking Iwere-Ile. A calabash containing parrot eggs was sent to the *Alaafin* with the instruction that he must commit suicide. Deserted by the army and the chiefs, *Alaafin* Awole committed suicide (Oguntomisin 230, Asiwaju and Law, 451). This led to the installation of *Alaafin* Adebo who succeeded Awole but he was a mere figure head having ruled “without the authority and power of king”. He reigned for only 130 days on the throne. His successor was not “recognized by Afonja who sent him a message that the ‘new moon’ at Oyo-Ile be speedily set. Makun reigned for only two months” (Oguntomisin, p. 230).

The calculated attempt by the chiefs appeared to have been fruitful as none of the princes was willing to ascend the throne. Consequent upon this, there was a period of interregnum during which there was the total absence of candidates from the royal line who could forestall or check the rebellion of the chiefs. Many of the chiefs, led by Afonja at Ilorin and Opele the *Baale* of Gbogun, began to declare their unilateral independence and started expanding their territories at the expense of the empire. Hence, in the words of Oguntomisin, “the death of the *Alaafin* (Awole) was the victory for the chiefs who were liberated to carry their rebellion to the point of destroying the authority of the monarchy” (p. 230).

As Asiwaju and Law have shown, the *coup de'tat* against *Alaafin* Awole proved to be the beginning of the collapse of the Oyo Empire. Afonja formally declared himself independent of Oyo and was poised to establishing his control over a large area of the north-east of the Oyo Empire. It is important to consider two issues here pertaining to Afonja's career as a military general and an elder statesman. This is necessary because he was (and probably is still) seen and regarded as a political villain by scholars and writers who had shown interest in Yoruba history and culture especially the Old Oyo Empire. This should not be so as Afonja's personality should not be disparaged. Many scholars focus much more on him than any of his contemporaries. Therefore, it is important to absolve the legendary political icon and a master military strategist in the history of Oyo and Ilorin in two areas.

The first is that by leading the coup that snuffed out life from *Alaafin* Awole and his courtiers in retaliation to the suicide mission to Iwere Ile, Afonja acted in self-defence. As an experienced warlord, he could not spare the *Alaafin* Awole's life and allow him to organize another plot against him and his troops from which they might not be able escape. He had no alternative other than to eliminate the courtiers and force Awole to commit suicide. Secondly, the final declaration of unilateral independence should not be regarded as a rebellion after all, considering the fact that Afonja did so only in 1817 (Boahem, p. 97). Going by the promise of the Oyo chiefs which they made before the 1797 coup, Afonja was to be installed the next *Alaafin* after *Awole*. However, the *Oyo Mesi* refused Afonja's candidature. He declared himself and his polity as a separate state for about twenty years after the coup. He had given them a long rope to pull at the end of which he acted decisively.

Afonja's action could be similarly justified on the basis of the power politics of the era. Since the military had taken over the political centre stage and the chiefs were not prepared to recognize the authority of any weak *Alaafin*, the question is: To whom should Afonja owe allegiance taking into cognizance the political-military influence his office conferred on him? To be candid, there was no other person that Afonja could submit himself to. The man in the eye of the storm had to consolidate his province and this he did through his military wizardry. Again, his carving out a kingdom for himself should not be over flogged.

It is germane to understand that those living in his state needed protection which Afonja was providing. Finally, as Lasisi (2002) has rightly argued, if conquered potentates and Oyo chiefs were declaring unilateral independence. He argues further that as characteristic of imperialist states, territorial expansion often created internal administrative and political problems. This usually led to the breakaway of formerly conquered territories or rebellion of state officials. The liberation of the Egba from Oyo in 1780 and the actions of Bashorun Gaha (1754-1774) are cases in point. What Ilorin did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century should therefore not be seen as extraordinary (p. 255). The breakaway of the constituent parts of the Old Oyo led to the burning of the capital, Oyo-Ile, and the court had to be moved a hundred miles south to the present site of new Oyo (Boahen, p. 98).

Afonja swung into action as a military leader. He was conscious of the limitation of his army and therefore embarked on the recruitment of new hands (troops). As Ajayi has informed us, at the time Afonja defected, Islam was not new in Yorubaland. The leading Yoruba warriors believed in the potency of Muslim charms and as a result frequently patronized Muslim priests and charm-makers (p. 143). Afonja was not left out in the race for magical protection by the warlords via Islam. He thus sought the assistance from Malam Alimi (Al Salam), an itinerant Muslim preacher. He surrounded himself with Yoruba Muslim faithful and Hausa slaves. As Oguntomisin has asserted, "While the Muslim cleric was to provide spiritual and talismanic support to ensure his success, the Hausa slaves were to serve in his army" (p. 231). Afonja was a good diplomat and a wise military strategist by consulting with Alimi who was the most respected and most feared Muslim priest on the one hand, and by conscripting Hausa slaves who swelled his army, on the other. These slaves were those that revolted against their masters in Oyo town and migrated to Ilorin town. Alimi was encouraged to relocate to Ilorin around 1817 from his settlement at Kuwo, a village near Ilorin township (Omoiya, p. 236).

Afonja's military valour combined with famous magical powers made the 'rebellious' army practically invincible even before it began military operations. Solagberu, a wealthy Yoruba Muslim trader, joined Afonja probably for personal rather than any religious motives. Afonja waxed

stronger and proceeded to besiege the northern Oyo towns which he forcibly brought under his new state with Ilorin as its capital. He made a fatal mistake in associating with Solagberu for Alimi created distrust between him and Afonja. Before then, “the leading Yoruba Muslims, as a minority group, stuck together and Solagberu settled at Oke Suna near Ilorin. He was able to attract the support of fellow Yoruba Muslims. Furthermore, Muslim slaves, were encouraged to revolt and join the rebellion as free men in a special task force called the *Jama’a*” (Ajayi, p. 143).

Unfortunately, Afonja discovered that he had lost the control of the situation at Ilorin especially that of the *Jama’a* who became increasingly directed their loyalty towards Alimi. The *Jama’a* became undisciplined and highhanded which alienated the non-Muslim friends of Afonja who were seeking power within the traditional Oyo (political) system. But they were confronted by an Islamic community at Ilorin with a new ideology challenging the very foundations of that system. *Aare Ona Kakanfo* Afonja, the Ilorin strong man refused to become a Muslim and tenaciously held on to traditional religion whose symbols he similarly refused to put away. His attempt to discipline the *Jama’a* eventually claimed his life as the dissident and disorderly bands turned against him and he died in 1831 (Boahen, p. 97). Even with Afonja’s death, it is safe to regard him as an hero by sticking to traditionalism instead of accepting the Islamic faith.

As Ajayi has pointed out the vacuum created by Afonja’s premature death was filled by Teyeje of Ogbomoso, who succeeded as the new *Kakanfo* and on two occasions attempted to rally Yoruba rulers to avenge Afonja’s death and re-conquer Ilorin. He failed in this respect and his personal quarrels with the *Onikoyi* of Ikoyi frustrated further attempts. Shortly afterwards Alimi died and his son Abdul Salaam took the initiative and won the contest for power at Ilorin from Solagberu who had contested for power at Ilorin from Solagberu who had tried to assert Yoruba Muslim control. Abdul Salaam was the new political arrowhead who succeeded in keeping Ilorin as an independent state and with the unalloyed support of his brother attempted to expand Ilorin power and Muslim influence in Yorubaland (pp. 143-144).

The power game in which Abdul Salaam emerged as the main power broker in Ilorin received the blessing of Fulani *jihadists* from the

northern parts of the present day Nigeria. The *jihad* was a reformist movement led by the well-celebrated Muslim scholar Shehu Uthman dan Fodio, a Fulani *gidda*. He rallied his fellow Fulani elements in his attempt to purify Islam in the much desecrated Hausa city-states and the *Habe* rulers' non-challant attitude to Islam and its doctrines. The revolt which was fuelled by political and socio-cultural forces broke out in 1804. The desire of the *jihadists* was to ensure the spread of Islam to the Atlantic seaboard. Since there was no flag bearer among the *jihadists* to actualize the dream and aspiration of the founding fathers of the Sokoto Caliphate the emergence of Abdul Salaam and his brother was therefore a welcome development. As Ajayi has demonstrated, "he (Abdul Salaam) eventually won the blessing of the Sokoto Caliphate and became the first *Emir*. Thus, as Ajayi has remarked, "Ilorin developed from a rebellious province of Oyo into a frontier post of the Fulani jihad" (p. 144). Ajayi (1983) must have been referring to Abdul Salaam and his brother as the two Fulani *mallams* that fronted for the Sokoto caliphate at Ilorin. This he cleverly puts across while summarizing the rift between the military governors and his sovereign at Oyo; and two Fulani *mallams* took advantage of these to convert Ilorin...into southern outposts of the empire" (p. 2).

The military encounters between Oyo and Ilorin continued after the Fulani had had the upper hand. However, the Ilorin leaders were highly favoured in these confrontations simply because Ilorin had the advantage of unity of purpose and dynamism of leadership which arose out of ethnic heterogeneity of its population. The Oyo-Yoruba, on the other hand, were riddled with dissension and treachery that emanated from political ambitions of *Alaafin's* officials and subordinates. As a result, Ilorin emerged victorious in its encounters with Oyo during the wars fought at Ogele, Mugbamugba, Kanda and Eleduwe. On each occasion one or more of the Oyo Yoruba leaders betrayed the empire either by refusing to fight or by allying with Ilorin. One of them, Lanloke of Ogbodo, a provincial chief, aided Ilorin in finally destroying the capital of the empire in 1837 (Lasisi, pp. 256-257).

The rise of Ilorin imperialism and disintegration of the Old Oyo led to the demographic shift southwards as several individuals and groups of Oyo-Yoruba had to flee for their lives. In order to avoid being

caught up in the cross fire of the era immediately Afonja declared himself independent of the Yoruba wars fought to recapture Ilorin escalated the movement of people into Ibolu, Epo and Ilorin itself. Consequent upon this was the swelling of the populations of host towns such as Saki, Igbeti, Ikoyi, Ogbomoso and Osogbo. Again, there arose new polities from the ashes of the Old Oyo Empire established by some of the leaders of the Oyo-Yoruba refugees. Such states included the capital of new Oyo at Ago Oja (present Oyo) which was established by Atiba, one of the surviving princes of Old Oyo Empire; Kurumi's Ijaye, Oluyole's Ibadan and the Egba kingdom which was led by Sodeke at the new capital Abeokuta. The Egba, who were the autochthonous owners of Ibadan were forced by Ife and Ijebu warlords to migrate to Abeokuta. Ibadan eventually emerged as the strongest imperialist state and harassed the Ijesa, Igbomina, Ekiti and other eastern Yorubaland kingdoms. The new Egba Kingdom expanded southwards into the Egbado country which it suppressed along with the Awori of Ota and Egun of Badagry. Ijaye became a strong military state under *Aare Ona Kakanfo* Kurumi. Lasisi notes that there was a pact between Ibadan and Ijaye which created spheres of influence between them in the defence of Yorubaland. However, this "encouraged aggressive behaviours on the part of these states against neighbouring settlements. This resulted in imperial rivalry between them which eventually culminated in the Ijaye war of 1860-62" (p. 258).

The Oyo-Ilorin political relations became more strained due to the imperialistic ambition of the Ibadan and Ilorin who were interested in expanding into the Ibolu enclave to the south such as Iwo and Ikirun under its imperial influence. The military show down between Ibadan and Ilorin took place in 1840 at the battle of Osogbo in which Ilorin got thrashed. This defeat of Ilorin forced it to consolidate the territories it had conquered and also to expand in the more loosely organized Igbomina and Ekiti regions. Again, Ilorin had to drop the ambition of direct conquest of Oyo-Yoruba settlements to its west and southwest. After 1840, it resolved to support one side against the other in the subsequent intra-Oyo-Yoruba disputes.

The emergence of Ibadan created rivalry among the new Oyo-Yoruba states of Ibadan, Ijaye and the New Oyo itself. Ibadan leaders felt that their state should automatically become the military and political

leader after its success at the battle of Osogbo. This feeling made them contemptuous of the *Alaafiin* and the *Aare*. *Alaafiin* Atiba was ready to accommodate the Ibadan posture but Kurumi, the *Aare*, refused to accept Ibadan supremacy. The *Aare* believed that he with his state Ijaye was the most qualified to bear the mantle of military leadership in the Oyo Oyo-Yoruba country. The two states, Ibadan and Ijaye, first slugged it out in 1844 during the Batedo war and Ijaye war of 1860 (Lasisi, p. 158; Ajayi, p. 153-154).

Ilorin took a wise decision by taking sides after it was defeated by Ibadan at the Osogbo war of 1840. Indeed, it sided Ibadan in the latter's military engagements. Ilorin therefore intervened on the side of Ibadan in the Batedo War of 1844. In return, Ibadan assisted Ilorin in subjugating and incorporating into Ilorin state many of the Igbomina and Ekiti settlements. Conversely, Ibadan benefitted tremendously in its alliance with Ilorin as it also acquired territories in those areas. Ilorin's expansionist policy into Ebira and Akoko regions as far as the border of Nupe Kingdom similarly received the express approval and support of Ibadan. In return, Ibadan was aided by Ilorin in its conquest of Ikoro and Ijero. But this rapprochement began to suffer setback when they both started contending for the acquisition of Otun in 1854 and 1860. This contest was probably responsible for Ilorin's change of policy toward Ibadan during the Ijaye war.

The Ijaye war was precipitated by the constitutional palaver over the succession to the late *Alaafiin* Atiba by his eldest son (*Aremo*) Adelu. However, *Aare* Kurumi, alluding to the ancient custom and tradition objected to Adelu's bid on the ground that having wine and dined with his father Atiba, he should have died with the monarch. This had been the custom in the Old Oyo Empire. Ibadan supported the New Oyo while the Egba and Ilorin stood solidly behind Ijaye under his henchman, the brave *Aare* Kurumi. In the end, Ijaye was defeated and sacked by Ibadan-New Oyo combined forces. The victory of Ibadan made it the undisputed military and political leader of Oyo-Yorubaland. A close examination of the Oyo-Ilorin political relations confirms that the events of the age of *real politik* dictated such relations. In politics, there is no permanent friend or permanent enemy but permanent interest. This was how the

Oyo-Yoruba and Ilorin relations were characterized by conflict and compromise.

### **Oyo-Ilorin Economic and Socio-Cultural Relations**

The relations that existed between the Oyo-Yoruba and Ilorin were not limited to politics. There were economic and socio-cultural relations that took place between them. In fact, the vibrancy of a polity's economy was the compass on which the politics of the state rotated. Put differently, the economy of a state serves as its life wire. Consequently, politics and economy are two key inseparable issues. According to Lasisi, "Economic and political actions are inseparable elements of imperialism. However, economic factor is more important because economic issues always underpin political activities" (p. 260).

Before Afonja's defection, Ilorin and the first Ibadan were important markets and the trans-Saharan trade routes with Oyo being one of its major southern entry points. Despite the pre-eminence of the European trade at the coastal areas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ilorin still remained the most important commercial centre in northern Nigeria while Ibadan continued to be the largest and most important commercial centre in Yoruba country (p. 260). Thus, both Ilorin and Ibadan as well as major Oyo-Yoruba towns were connected by the various trade routes that linked the north and south of the country. It was the Oyo-Yoruba that introduced into Ilorin commodities like foodstuffs, beads, pottery and local textiles as well as slaves for which Ilorin became famous. In order to have access to these and other articles of trade both Oyo Yoruba and Ilorin states had to consolidate their conquered territories by controlling the trade routes under their jurisdiction. The interdependence nature of Ibadan and Ilorin in these routes ultimately pitched Ibadan against those coastal peoples who were bound to involve in one form or the other. This was precisely what happened in the conflicts involving Ibadan and the Ijebu/Egba forces. Indeed, the major conflicts that characterized Yorubaland and Ilorin were prompted by the desire of the various groups to have direct control of trade routes in their respective domains. In doing this, military alliances were often formed while vassal states were compelled to assist their sovereign overlords. The whole scenario is well captured by Lasisi while writing on trade routes *vis-à-vis* the Ekiti Parapo Confederacy or Kiriji War:



The war with its several battle fronts confirmed what has been said earlier about the significance of economic factor of trade routes in either sustaining anti-imperialist resistance or in consolidating imperial domination. This was because it was through those routes that the belligerents obtained guns and ammunition. For instance, the Lagos-Ondo-Okeigbo route was invaluable to the confederacy. On the other hand, the Lagos-Abeokuta-Iseyin and Igbeti route was more important to Ilorin. Although there was no fighting between Ibadan and Ilorin along this route it was not absolutely trouble-free. This was because Ibadan between 1889 and 1890 resorted to kidnapping traders in Iseyin and Igbeti areas who were believed to be smuggling rifles to Ilorin (p. 261).

What the above statement emphasizes is that the economic interest forced not Ilorin and Oyo-Yoruba alone but all the states and kingdoms in pre-colonial Nigeria to engage in warfare in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And this largely accounted for offensive and defensive military expeditions. The imperialistic tendencies of Ilorin, Oyo-Yoruba and the Egba Kingdom were largely dictated by economic factors (Erinosho 2003). The Oyo-Yoruba and Ilorin relations continued until February 1897 when the Royal Niger Company operating from Lokoja brought Ilorin on her knees militarily “with a force that ironically included two battalions mostly of Oyo-Yoruba from Ibadan” (p. 262).

In the area of social and cultural borrowings, the Oyo-Yoruba and Ilorin influenced significantly on one another. The first *Emir* of Ilorin, Abdul Salaam had to appoint first one and then two of the military commanders from the Oyo-Yoruba group due to the historical truism that Ilorin was founded by an Oyo-Yoruba hunter. The title *Balogun* which is the Yoruba translation of war captain was adopted and this “attested to the demographic and cultural influence of Oyo-Yoruba”. Moreover, the Oyo-Yoruba language became the official language of the ruling class and the *lingua franca* of ordinary folks in their inter-personal relations and trading activities. In addition until recently, “past *emirs* in Ilorin in

spite of their chadic linguistic origin, had *Oriki* like all Oyo-Yoruba people”.

On the other hand, the Islamic fervour was accelerated by the contact between Ilorin and the Sokoto Caliphate. Even though *Aare Ona Kakanfo* Afonja did not embrace Islam, through Ilorin, the Oyo-Yoruba were affected by Islam. For instance, some notable rulers like those of Ikoyi, Gbogun and New Oyo, and indeed Oluewu, the last *Alaafin* of the Old Oyo Empire accepted Islam. There is no doubt that Afonja inadvertently turned Ilorin into the first strong Muslim base within the Oyo-Yoruba country. Consequently, the cosmopolitan and Islamic nature of Ilorin Emirate led to the early development of Islamic education among the Oyo-Yoruba group in the metropolis than their kith and kith who were further south. In this way, Ilorin gradually developed into a kind of “Islamic lighthouse” for the entire Yorubaland (p. 264).

### **Conclusion**

The fall and final disintegration of the Old Oyo Empire marked a turning point in the history of the entire Yorubaland. The balkanization of the empire was accentuated by the breakdown of the central authority, greatly aided by *Alaafin* Awole’s perfidy in his attempt to eliminate his co-contender for the throne and later his *Aare Ona Kakanfo*, Afonja. Some clarifications were made regarding the personality of Afonja’s parentage and career thereby underscoring that he was a hero rather than a rebel, given the tumultuous political climate of the time. Again, he was not the only character that defied the *Alaafin*’s authority and declared his unilateral independence, but academic searchlight seems to have been beamed on him more than any of his peers, portraying him as a political villain.

Afonja’s action set in motion a chain of events which culminated in the rise of Ilorin as well as the emergence of successor sates of Ijaye, New Oyo and Ibadan while not leaving Abeokuta, the capital of the Egba Kingdom which colonized the Egbado country, the Awori of Ota and Badgry. The political economic and socio-cultural aspects that characterized the Oyo-Yoruba and Ilorin relations were enunciated. By and large, in politics, what exists and constant is permanent interest which creates no room for permanent friendship or enmity. The lesson of this study for this generation and the upcoming ones is that political

actors should be considerate in their actions so as not to dabble into actions that could consume them and set the entire body polity aflame.

## REFERENCES

- Ajayi, J.F.A. (1984). "The Aftermath of the Fall of Old Oyo" In Ajayi, J.F.A. and Crowder, M (eds.), *History of West Africa, Volume Two*, 129-166. London: Longman.
- Ajayi, J.F.A. (1983). *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*, Seventh Impression. London: Longman.
- Akinjogbin, I.A. (1981). "Dahomey and Yoruba in the Nineteenth Century" In J.F.A. Ajayi and Ian Espie (eds): *A Thousand Years of West African History*, Lagos: Thomas Nelson (Nigeria) Ltd.
- Asiwaju, A.I. and Law, R.(1985): "From the Volta to the Niger, C. 1600-1800" In Ajayi, J.F.A. and Crowder, M. (eds) *History of West Africa, Volume One*, 412-464, Longman.
- Atanda, J.A. (2007). *A comprehensive history of the Yoruba people up to 1800*, edited by G.O. Oguntomisin. Ibadan: John Archers (Publishers) Ltd.
- Boahen, A.Adu (1980). *Topics in West African history*. London: Longman.
- Chikendu, P.N. (2004): *Imperialism & nationalism*, Enugu: Academic Publishing Company.
- Erinosho, T.O. (2003) "The Anglo-Egba Relations 1842-1914: A Diplomatic Interpretation", Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, History Dept, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Johnson, S. (1921). *The history of the Yorubas*, Lagos: C.S.S. Bookshops.
- Joshua, G.O. (2011) "Patterns of Inter-group Relations: A Study of Oyo and Ilorin in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century", (Unpublished B.A.(Ed) Long Essay, Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria).
- Lasisi, R.O.(2002) "Oyo-Yoruba and Ilorin Relations in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century" In Oguntomisin, G.O. and Ajayi, S.A. (eds): *Readings in Nigerian history and culture*, 253-269, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd.
- Oguntomisin, G.O.(2002) "Power-Politics in Old Oyo Empire, 1754-1796" In Oguntomisin, G.O. and Ajayi, S.A. (eds) *Readings in Nigerian history and culture*, 225-234.
- Omoiya, S.Y.(2002) "Evolution and Change of the Balogun Institution in Ilorin Emirate 1827-1960" in Oguntomisin, G.O. and Ajayi, S.A. (eds) *Readings in Nigerian history and culture*, 235-252.
- Oxford advanced learners' dictionary*. (2010). Oxford University Press.
- Webster, J.B; Boahen, A.A. and Tidy, M (1980): *The revolutionary years of West Africa since 1800*. New Edition, London: Longman.