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Conflict as a propelling instrument of change and continuity: The Ilorin example

Omoiya S. Y.

Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

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As philosopher says that change is the permanent phenomenon in life, so, conflict has been identified as the propelling agent. It thus explains why these natural phenomena have been employed to discuss the historical experience in a part of Africa. Ilorin is one of the capitals of states (Kwara State) in Nigeria. It is located on latitude 80-30 north and longitude 40-35 east. As frontier to both the Caliphate, the political structure briquetted on most of the northern states of Nigeria after the success of the 19 Century Jihad, led by Shehu Uthman Danfodio and the Yoruba speaking peoples of the south west, Ilorin history have been identified by scholars of both regions as necessary knowledge to illuminate the gray areas in their respective studies. Even though much are yet to be explored from its wide historical roles, this effort is one of such discussions to illustrate the impact of conflict in its being and changes that have been registered in its past. The study will be approached from the historical perspectives by appraising the sequence of changes witnessed in the area premised on conflict.

Key words: Conflict, change.

INTRODUCTION

The proclamation of Ilorin as an emirate by the Abdul-Salami and Shitta, both whom were children of Shehu Alimi, the Fulani cleric invited to Ilorin by Aare Afonja to provide him spiritual support, to sustain Ilorin as an independent state from Oyo Empire, could be taken for a declaration of war on the entire Yoruba people, because Ilorin became an entity and known in history as a province of the old Oyo Empire. Indeed, AbdulSalami and Shitta seemed to appreciate the complexity of both the environment and their personal limitations by adopting an all inclusive administrative system to meet the challenges. At the internal level, the newly proclaimed leaders of Ilorin as an emirate, sought the support and co-operation of leaders of the three main linguistic groups of Hausa, Fulani and the Yoruba in Ilorin, by making them members

of the emirate council and awarding each of them the title of a Balogun (Banmole, 1980). The adoption of the title of Balogun for the linguistic leaders of the diverse linguistic groups in Ilorin was indeed a diplomatic concession to ensure the full support of the local population in Ilorin (Omoiya, 1988). Added to this was the subtle manner the Ilorin population was mobilized to prepare for war to defend the emirate system which they were originally not involved in its formation (Omoiya, 1988).

Transformation of Ilorin to an emirate

The suzerainty of the old Oyo Empire on Ilorin, from the 17 century was directly influenced by Alaafin Ojigi's

E-mail: omoiyasaad2002@yahoo.com.

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interest to save the Igbomina Yoruba area that had been turned slave reservoirs by the Nupes. He established the first administrative structure to coordinate the scattered settlements later known as Ilorin. (I. Mustain, 1977). The first of the Oyo Ajele (Resident) to be appointed was Laderin (Johnson, 1976). His son, Pasin, was also succeeded by his own son Alugbin, the father of Aare Afonja (Johnson, 176). The personal animosity between Aare Afonja and Alaafin Aole degenerated to show off strength between the two leading figures in the administration of Oyo Empire. This culminated into the summary termination of Alaafin Aole and declaration of independence for Ilorin.

Aare Afonja's effort to consolidate his power and position as the supreme authority in Ilorin dictated two major actions that eventually played key roles in the historical changes witnessed in Ilorin. One of such actions of the Aare was his contact with Shehu Alimi through his friend Sholagberu (Danmole, 1980). The second was the Aare's decision to recruit slaves who ran to Ilorin from their masters in Oyo town, after Ilorin had been declared independent of Oyo, into his army (Atanda, 1973). The first of the Aare's steps was to seek spiritual support for his new position and status. He therefore persuaded Shehu Alimi to migrate into Ilorin town from Kuwo (a suburb of Ilorin) where he had then settled, after his Islamic evangelical mission to parts of Yoruba land, such as Oshogbo and even Oyo Ile (Danmole, 1980). It was for Aare's persuasion that Shehu Alimi eventually migrated to Ilorin town (Danmole, 1980).

On the recruitment of the slaves who ran to Ilorin as sanctuary, the Aare saw their presence in Ilorin as an advantage to have soldiers who do not have any relations with the local environment. Therefore, the question of betrayer would be out of the way, given the circumstances of his declaration of independence for Ilorin from Oyo. Aare's confidence and high regards for the slave soldiers soon result to its abuse. The slave soldiers saw themselves as an important element to the survival of Ilorin as an independent entity. Therefore, they resorted to committing atrocities and rapacity that Fagboun, the left wing commander of the Aare's army had to call Aare's attention to the implications of the excesses of the slave soldiers, who were commonly referred to as Aare's servants (Johnson, 1976). Aare Afonja's efforts to restructure the army with the aim of preventing further damage by the slave soldiers for their rapacity mobilized the slave soldiers to organize a mutiny, which eventually resulted in Aare Afonja's death.

The death of Aare Afonja in about 1813 naturally created vacuum in the political leadership of Ilorin (Johnson, 1976). Given the fact that his slave-recruited soldiers killed him, and publicly burnt his corps, and there was no ready counter force to evolve a new political leader, Ilorin had to remain in a state of interregnum for some time. The Baba Isale, Agboin, was then very sick and could not mobilize a counter force to arrest the

confusing situation (Alesinloye, 1985). On the part of Shehu Alimi, he concentrated on his cleric duties by leading a group of Muslims in daily prayers (Alesinloye, 1985). The death of Shehu Alimi in about 1817, five years after Aare Afonja's death, was a turning point in the history of Ilorin. It opened a new course of events that culminated into the emergence of a new political structure in the area.

Shehu Alimi, as a committed Islamic cleric, whose major duty was leading congregation in prayers as the Imam, certainly had no other position that could be inherited by his children. As an Imam, which is a religious position, was indeed not necessarily to be inherited by the family of the immediate past Imam. Any Muslim could actually vie for the position (Danmole, 1980). This situation explains why the contest for the position of the Imam held by Shehu Alimi in Ilorin, was contested for by AbdulSalami, Shehu Alimi's first son, and Bako from Serikin Gambari's family. The support given to AbdulSalami by personalities such as Sholagberu and other prominent Yoruba group leaders close to Shehu Alimi, made AbdulSalami to be victorious over Bako (Danmole, 1980).

As the Imam of the mosque where the slave soldiers often congregate to perform their daily prayers, AbdulSalam and Shitta, his younger brother, were fast at establishing close relations with them (Alesinloye, 1985). It was by these relations that the slave soldiers were turned to be used to attack those that were accused of being unfriendly to AbdulSalami's leadership in the mosque. They intimidate those considered to be influential within Ilorin community and could checkmate their political ambition. They attack settlements such as Okesuna, which on its own was an entity. The successful use of the slave soldiers by AbdulSalami and Shitta to terminate all form of oppositions to the realization of their political ambition in Ilorin, actually paved the way for the declaration of Ilorin as an emirate in about 1823 (Alesinloye, 1985).

Changes in Ilorin, consequent on conflict

The use of the slave soldiers by AbdulSalami and Shitta could certainly not continue after Ilorin had been proclaimed an emirate and without any internal resurrection. Indeed the killing of prominent individuals such as Sholagberu and other Muslim clerics and the massacre of the entire settlement of Okesunna, had intimidated individual or group to face the Jamma (group). The names adopted by the slave soldiers were mostly Hausa (Alesinloye, 1985).

The new political leader in Ilorin, AbdulSalami who had conferred on himself the title of an Emir, with his brother Shitta, had to adopt diplomatic means to make themselves accepted by the local population. Apart from the fact that they were both aware that Ilorin is a Yoruba

land, its historical relations as part of the old Oyo Empire, must have been considered a bigger problem for them to handle alone. Hence, they identified the leaders of the major linguistic groups of the Hausa, Fulani and Yoruba to be co-opted as members of the emirate council and at the same time honored with the title of Balogun (war commander) (Omoiya, 2001). The cooption and appointment of the diverse linguistic group leaders as members of the emirate council must have been to involve them as stakeholder and conferring on them the title of Balogun, was an anticipatory preparation for war. This was a diplomatic measure to mobilize the population of Ilorin to defend the emirate system.

Conflict and diplomacy

Ogele War (1823/1824)

An army was raised under Toyeye, the Bale of Ogbomoso, who succeeded Aare Afonja as Kakanfo. The army camped at Ogele, expecting to easily run over the Fulani authority in Ilorin (Johnson, 1976). The Fulani had anticipated and prepared for the attack. They demanded that each of the Balogun should raise an army among their respective linguistic groups to complement the Jamm2 (Johnson, 1976).

Having carefully studied the organizational weakness of the Yoruba army on the battled field, the Ilorin army concentrated on the use of Calvary. This inflicted heavy human loses on the Yoruba army. A good number of Yoruba towns in the Ibolo areas were destroyed and some others were fully captured (Johnson, 1976).

The defeat of the allied forces of the Yoruba was a moral booster for the emerging forces in Ilorin. On the other hand, the morale of the Yoruba allied forces waned because of the betrayal noticed amongst them. The tactical error on the part of the Yoruba allied forces was that they concentrated mainly on the military organization, but ignored the diplomatic aspect to woo the original Yoruba settlers within the new emirate structure. Their situation would not have been as bad had they penetrated into the rank and file of Yoruba people that were aggrieved by acts of the Fulani, who imposed themselves as the authority in Ilorin.

The Mugbamugba War (October – December 1824)

After a short respite, the Yoruba re-organized and resolved to get rid of the Fulanis in Ilorin. This time, they went into alliance with Monjia, the King of Rabbah (Johnson, 1976). The encounter took place between March and April, when the locust fruits were ripe for harvest.

The lingering effects of the previous war were apparent. A good number of places were still deserted, while there was not enough farm that could sustain the long camping

of the army. Both the besiegers and the besieged soon resorted to living on locust fruit (Igba). Hence the war took its title *Mugba Mugba* (Johnson, 1976).

Once again, the allied forces of the Yoruba were defeated. Their knowledge of how to deal with the power of Ilorin was still defective. The successive defeat of the Yoruba allied forces made them to lose the courage for launching further attack. On the other hand, the emirate army grew to be more confident and aggressive. Consequently, many more Yoruba towns and villages were destroyed and the peoples' properties were looted by the ravaging army of Ilorin (Johnson, 1976).

Two major factors were responsible for the success of the Ilorin army: superior use of the Calvary and effective use of diplomacy. They penetrated the ranks of the Yoruba leaders to cause disaffection and personality clash amongst them. There was, for instance an intense rivalry between Toyese, the *Kakanfo* of Oyo at Ogbomoso and Adegun, the Onikoyi. The alliance of Ilorin with the Onikoyi eventually led to a war between the two (according to oral information obtained from Alhaji Salihu Aluko, 1986).

The destruction of most of the Yoruba towns and villages by the victorious army of Ilorin turned a good number of Yoruba who lived in them refugees. They were scattered all over Yorubaland and this continued to be a source of worry for cities that had not been touched by war. This explains why the Yoruba leaders could not live with the reality of Ilorin emirate army's victories. Hence they recouped to launch another attack.

Kanla war (1825 - 1826)

As a result of successive Ilorin victories over the Oyo forces, the powers and influence of the *Alaafin* of Oyo continued to dwindle to the point of their being limited to the capital. More and more of old Oyo Empire's provinces declared their independence from Oyo's authority and tributes were no longer paid to the *Alaafin*. It was at this period of anarchy and confusion that *Alaafin* Amodo, one of the grandchildren of *Alaafin* Abiodun's twin brother, came to the throne. Understanding the situation as it was, the *Alaafin* began his reign by trying to consolidate the remaining loyalists to his institution and stretching arm of friendship to prominent chiefs around Oyo.

The *Alaafin* identified Lanloke, the Chief of Ogodo as one of such prominent and powerful chiefs. Ogodo, according to its historical origin, used to be a Nupe town (Johnson, 1976). But by the end of the 18th century, Yoruba migrants from Oyo had taken over the town for commercial reasons (Johnson, 1976). Ogodo grew to become a big commercial city that served as the exchange centre for the Yoruba and Nupe traders. They traded in different merchandise and thus the powers and influence of its ruler grew with its relevance.

Alaafin Amodo's interest in Ogodo was to renew the blood ties with the Yoruba population in the town, use

their influence and contacts to rebuild the powers of his institution. He gave out his daughter in marriage to Lanloke, the Chief of Ogodo (Johnson, 1976). Rather than appreciate this kind of gesture of *Alaafin* Amodo Lanloke grew to become more conscious of his new influence, powers and wealth. He treated *Alaafin* Amodo's daughter with indignity and disrespect. This was deliberately to spite her father as the *Alaafin*. In one of such contemptuous treatments of *Alaafin* Amodo's daughter, Lanloke nearly beat his wife to the point of death (Johnson, 1976).

Lanloke was neither remorseful for his act, nor appreciate the possible consequence of his action. He was rather boastful and carefree about what the *Alaafin* would do (Johnson, 1976). He allied with Ilorin, and assumed a more aggressive posture. With the support of Ilorin soldiers, Chief Lanloke attacked Oyo town and the city was sacked. Oyo thus became an Ilorin tributary (Johnson, 1976).

Alaafin Amodo became very bitter and depressed as a result of the humiliation he suffered and as a result of the destruction of Oyo. He remained very hopeful. He continued with the diplomatic efforts at fostering unity among the Yoruba chiefs that had been divided by jealousy and petty rivalry (Johnson, 1976).

Alaafin Amodo eventually brought the divided Yoruba chiefs together and therefore raised a formidable force to engage the Ilorin army. The battle took place at Kanla, from where the battle took its name. The Yoruba chiefs were together physically, but they were spirits apart. The rivalry among them resulted in treachery. For instance, the Onikoyi was known to be sick and unfit to be on the battlefield. However, the *Edun* of Gbogun deliberately encouraged him to man a central point, so that Ilorin army could penetrate the Yoruba forces and rout them (Johnson, 1976).

Already informed of the treachery in the Oyo camp, the Ilorin forces, merely mounted defenses on the other fronts as they veraciously attacked from the Onikoyi's front (Johnson, 1976). The Onikoyi was rounded up and killed. Ilorin quickly seized the opportunity to penetrate the Yoruba lines and drive the soldiers out of the battle field.

Many of the remaining towns and villages still loyal to the *Alaafin* were attacked, destroyed and deserted. Chief Oja, the first settler at Ago (the present day Oyo town), was among those that were drowned in River Ogun as they fled from the invading Ilorin forces (Johnson, 1976).

The recurring victory of Ilorin army over the allied forces of the *Alaafin* was naturally bound to boost the morale of the emirate army and its allies, yet successive *Alaafin* of Oyo were undaunted. Consequently they continued to recoup and re-launch attack against Ilorin.

The Eleduwe war (1825 - 1826)

The distress that followed the last defeat of Oyo empire

and its allies by the ravaging army of Ilorin and its allies was attributed to the depression of *Alaafin* Amodo, who eventually got ill and died (Johnson, 1976). Prince Oluewu was unanimously elected as the new *Alaafin* (Johnson, 1976). Going by the process of selecting the preceding *Alaafin* of Oyo before Oluewu, potential candidates used to engage themselves in fierce contests that it was never possible to select an *Alaafin* by unanimous votes of the Oyo mesi (Oyo empire's king makers). This explains the very low morale of both the royal families and people. The position of the *Alaafin* had been reduced to titular institution, rather than the historically known *Alaafin* that does not only reign but rules.

Alaafin Oluewu was fully aware of the situation at the time of his enthronement but like his predecessors, he was full of hope and determination to reverse the situation. *Alaafin* Oluewu as a person could be described as haughty and irritable in temperament. He however, acceded to the call when *Emir* Shitta of Ilorin, requested him (the *Alaafin*) to pay him the traditional homage of a vassal (Johnson, 1976). The chiefs of Oyo and members of the royal family prevailed on *Alaafin* Oluewu to accede to the call of *Emir* Shitta, to save the capital and the remnant towns that still paid their allegiance to Oyo (Johnson, 1976).

Emir Shitta received *Alaafin* Oluewu with every mark of honour and distinction; but he confiscated the *Gbedu* drum that was often beaten before an *Alaafin* to show his royalty. In the words of *Emir* Shitta: "there cannot be two kings in my dominion but one only, and that is myself" (Johnson, 1976). By *Emir* Shitta's statement, the *Alaafin* and his institutions were reduced to mere subjects of the ravaging foreigners based in Ilorin.

Alaafin Oluewu felt badly humiliated and insulted by the act of *Emir* Shitta. He refused to honour the second call on him by the *Emir* to come down to Ilorin. Not even the counsel by both Basorun and Asipa could change his mind for the fear of the consequences on Oyo, by *Alaafin*'s refusal to honour *Emir* Shitta's call; both Akioso, the Basorun and Ailumo, the Asipa went against the expressed order of *Alaafin* Oluewu forbidding them to go (Johnson, 1976).

The *Emir* was disturbed and, in fact, felt insulted by the refusal of *Alaafin* Oluewu to honour his call. The *Emir* therefore decided to punish the *Alaafin*. He ordered Lanloke the Chief of Ogodo to ravage the suburbs of Oyo and in fact threaten the city (Johnson, 1976). *Alaafin* Oluewu was not unprepared. He had sought and got the support of the Bariba to subdue his enemies both within and without. Those within were the Basorun and the Asipa who defied his instruction not to go on his behalf to *Emir* Shitta in Ilorin and those outside were the *Fulani* authority in Ilorin and their allies.

With the alliance of the Bariba led by Eleduwe, *Alaafin* Oluewu was able to punish both the Asipa and the Basorun with death (Johnson, 1976). He went further to

attack Ogodo and raised down Gbodo³¹. Ilorin army and its allies were defeated (Johnson, 1976). They were pursued until they ran into the flooded Ogun River. Most of the Ilorin soldiers were drowned.

Alaafin Oluewu and his Bariba allies were naturally elated by their victory over the combined army of Ilorin and its allies. Therefore, he decided to summon warriors and chiefs all over the old Oyo Empire's territories. *Alaafin* Oluewu was unaware that some of these Yoruba chiefs he invited were, in alliance with Ilorin and all of them cherished their independence from Oyo's authority. *Alaafin* Oluewu was of the belief that those in alliance with Ilorin were doing it out of necessity and not out of convenience. He held the opinion that there was a general resentment of foreigner's rule over Ilorin (Johnson, 1976).

The immediate response of the Yoruba chiefs to *Alaafin* Oluewu's confirmed his feelings that they would be glad to be free from the foreigner's yolk. At a meeting of the war council chaired by *Alaafin* Oluewu and in which Eleduwe, the Bariba warrior and invited Yoruba chiefs were present the *modus operandi* for prosecuting the war to overrun Ilorin and reclaim the old Oyo Empire's territories were concluded (according to oral information obtained from Alhaji Kawu Folorunsho Agaka, 1986).

The *Fulani* authority in Ilorin was indeed distressed by the response to Oluewu's assemblage of the Yoruba warriors and chiefs. Being fully alive to the seriousness and the extent of Ilorin's defeat at Gbodo encounter, the *Emir* was desperate to avert the impending calamity on his territory and people. Added to the desperate moves of the *Emir* was the fear of the Bariba warrior, Eleduwe or Waru Kura, the commander of the Bariba ally of Oyo Empire. The Ilorin people referred to him as Ikoko (Wolf) (according to oral information obtained from Alhaji Kawu Folorunsho Agaka, 1986) because he was commonly known to destroy every living being in the area he captured.

The *Emir* embarked on both internal and external moves to save the situation. On the external wing, *Emir* Shitta sent for assistance from the *Sultan* of Sokoto his suzerain. Ibrahim Khalil, the third *Emir* of Gwandu, personally led a joint force of Sokoto and Gwandu warriors to aid Ilorin (according to oral information obtained from Alhaji Kawu Folorunsho Agaka, 1986).

On the local side, the *Emir* tried to identify individuals and groups of people among the Yoruba that had an axe to grind with the *Alaafin*. He was able to locate one Yusufu Bale, the progenitor of the present Alanamu family of Ilorin.

Yusufu was a renowned warrior specially known for the manner in which he overcame his enemies. He physically beat the enemy to capture them, and was therefore fondly referred to as Alana-mu.

Yusufu Bale or Alana-mu considered his invitation to join the Ilorin army against the organized team of *Alaafin* Oluewu, as good opportunity to revenge the unfortunate

circumstances under which he packed out of Oyo town and settled at Reke, a village not too far from Ilorin (Omoyia, 1986). He supported Ilorin with his army, and was also involved in the diplomatic game, employed by the authority in Ilorin to play the Yoruba chiefs against one another (Omoyia, 1986).

At the time Ilorin was preparing for the impending war with the combined forces of the Yoruba and the Bariba's from all fronts, old rivalry, sharp differences and fears of Bariba domination were seriously drumming in the war camp assembled by *Alaafin* Oluewu. For instance, special privileges accorded to the Bariba by *Alaafin* made the Yoruba warriors fear that the Bariba would only be replacing the established *Fulani* hegemony already in Ilorin and that the Bariba dominance or rule over them will be real rather than mere rendering of assistance to engage Ilorin (Johnson, 1976).

Most of the Yoruba chiefs assembled by *Alaafin* Oluewu to sack Ilorin; actually cherished their respective independence. Their fears were further compounded by the experience of their direct encounter with the Bariba, who had actually begun to behave like the new lords of the Yoruba chiefs. They had no doubt that they would be treated later like a captured people after the war. This explains why some of them made up their minds to undermine the proclaimed interest of the joint Yoruba forces against Ilorin. In the heat of the battle, Prince Atiba of Ago and Timi, Bamgbaiye of Ede, deliberately left the wing of their command, to make the penetration of Ilorin army possible. Both *Alaafin* Oluewu and the Bariba warrior Wari kura were therefore rounded up. Both of them fell in the battle (Johnson, 1976).

The death of *Alaafin* Oluewu and the leader of the Bariba allied forces, Warikura, was indeed a turning point in the History of Ilorin as a sovereign state and power; the entire politics of Yorubaland and warfare that characterized the whole of the nineteenth century. The victory of Ilorin army in all its war encounters against Oyo army and its allies have subject of controversy among scholars and philosophers. While some of them attributed the cause to high rate and degree of treachery exhibited by the Yoruba at a point of war, that their unity was crucial to their collective survival to the historical curse evoked by *Alaafin* Aole, that "Yoruba would never again be united and that they would rule by their slaves" (Johnson, 1976) after his failure to get Aare Afonja and other prominent Oyo chiefs exterminated by sending them to attack Iwere (Johnson, 1976).

Others see it as a normal trend in political evolution, that such rivalry, treachery and suspicion are prevalent in some other personal and group relations (Johnson, 1976).

Conclusion

The news of the death of Warukura and *Alaafin* Oluewu

readily aggravated the confusion in old Oyo. This led to the exodus of its inhabitants. The attack on old Oyo and remnants of places that still paid allegiance to the *Alaafin* by Lanloke the Chief of Ogodo, who had always been an inveterate enemy of Oyo and an active ally of Ilorin accelerated the people's migration to different directions. While a good number of Oyo migrants went to Kisi, some others went to Igboho. A noticeable number even went to Ilorin (Adelabu, 1986). Thus, Oyo was deserted and it went into ruins.

A general evaluation of Ilorin war encounters with the united forces of the Yoruba could certainly be seen as wars won by diplomatic means rather than physical combat with the united forces. Given the very limited army population of Ilorin and the scattered manner in which they use to obtain their allies, the victories recorded over the united army of the Yoruba and their allies could be directly anchored on the efficacy of Ilorin's use of diplomacy. Most of the times, Ilorin penetrates the ranks of the Yoruba army not only to use the information so obtained to plan for their operations, it even goes to the extent of signing accord with some of the Yoruba Chiefs who cherish their independence rather than to reconsolidate Oyo's dominance. Therefore the treachery, rivalry and betrayal among Yoruba leaders were often influenced by Ilorin through the network of its diplomatic relations. Ilorin, being a product of conflicts, serves as a good historical reference to illustrate a consequence of conflict in a part of Africa. It also explains the bases for the dominance of the military class in Ilorin political structure. It was this structure that the British colonial administration attempted to reorder but ended up achieving a harmonized structure that guarantees' mutual respect amongst the indigenous political institutions. It is important to acknowledge that the emirate system being operated in Ilorin is unique, for being a blend of Hausa and Yoruba political systems in Nigeria.

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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