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**A Study of the Origin of an Indigenous Community in  
Central Nigeria: Interrogating Akpoto-Igala  
Phenomenon**

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**Abstract**

The Igala lives in a deciduous forest belt to the south and open savannah vegetation to the north. They occupy a triangular tract of land located at the confluence of rivers Niger and Benue. The Igala, like many other ethnic groups in Nigeria, holds several myths and traditions concerning their probable place of origin. Various attempts at tracing the origin of the people have elicited as many traditions as are scholars who attempted to unravel the origin of the people. This paper is therefore, an attempt to examine the various arguments on the origin and the place of Akpoto in the traditions of the people.

**Introduction**

In virtually every society in Africa, serious consideration is given to one's place of origin. The society views it as an abnormality if one cannot trace his place of origin. Even in traditional political title taking, the ability for any contender to trace his

genealogy to the founding father of the clan is considered one of the basic pre requisite or eligibility to such throne. One's ability to trace his origin makes him a worthy member of his community. Such is the case with the Igala of central Nigeria. The curiosity or need to trace or recount their place of origin was instrumental to the various versions of histories of the people as provided by scholars.

### **Traditions of Origin**

The origin of the Igala is surrounded with myths; several traditions of origin points at Agenapoje, Jukun, Bini and Yoruba. (Boston 1962, p.373). These traditions were reflective of the relationship that had existed between the Igala and the various peoples. Equally, an analytical study of the various traditions reveals that they were in most cases, historical traditions or explanations that tend to trace the history of the ruling clans. In other words, most of these traditions are directed at the patterns of migration and possibly the history of the *Attah* Kingship. Therefore, what existed as the history of the people constituted a meagre fraction of the entire history of the polity and people of the Igala. Early European explorers, writers, anthropologists and historians who delved into the history of the Igala people could not make any serious analytical study of the area except through the instrumentality of inter-group relations. Also these scholars could hardly trace the historical origin of the Igala except those that connect their kingship ties to either Bini, Jukun and so on. Therefore, what actually existed as the probable historical origins of the people were those that have been established as a result of language affinities as is the case of the Yoruba or those that have to do with either cultural or kingship relations as is the case of Bini and Jukun. (Boston 1968, p. 13-14) expresses the problems surrounding the historical origin of the Igala thus:

The Igala are located at one of the natural crossroad in Nigerian geography...this has brought them into contact with a wide range of peoples. The confluence area like Poland in Europe seems to have been pulled in different directions at different periods. At times, the Igala have been oriented towards the Yoruba, at other times towards Bini, or again, later on, towards the Jukun Empire, and they themselves have exercised a considerable influence on surrounding peoples such as the Idoma, the Northern Ibo and the Nupe.

For a proper understanding of the various versions of the historical origin of the Igala people, attempt is made here to discuss the various views of scholars. Before this attempt, it is perhaps important to note here that before the introduction of kingship as explained by various scholars, the Igala as a people or the indigenous Igalas represented by the Igala-Mela (probably represented by the name Akpoto) were the original inhabitants of Idah and the outlying districts. Various traditions tend to look at this group as mere kingmakers who in themselves did not evolve any serious or perhaps

central political organization until the emergence of immigrant “super kings” (Bini or Jukun). As rightly noted “the country is said to have been always occupied by the Okpoto tribe except a strip of land by both the Benue and Niger Rivers, which the Bassa-komo and Bass-Nge (also called Bassa Buno and Ibara) tribes succeeded in wresting from the Okpotos”. (Byng-Hall 1907, p. 166). As earlier indicated in the historical analysis of the various traditions of origins, the origin of indigenous people was played down, for that of the historical origin of the kingship. In most cases the people themselves misconstrue their origin to mean the origin of their kingship. This perhaps account for why every attempt at tracing the origin of the people is attributed to the personalities of Ebulejonu and Ayegba Oma Idoko who were progenitors of Igala royal clans.

In a corpus of tradition collected by Patridge, a colonial officer, he gave a narrative on the emergence of the Igala kingship. According to him:

The present royal families are “strangers” but they have held the throne for many generations. The older race is represented by the Asadu, a hereditary title signifying Prime Minister... a great land owner, having as much power as, if not more than the Atta himself. Long ago the older race voluntarily made over the throne to these “strangers”. The first *Atta* was a woman named Ebblejjonu, but her rule was so unsatisfactory that the Salic law was instituted, and still prevails. [sic] (Patrdge 1902, p. 329)

In another source, (Byng Hall 1907, p. 166) is of the view that “a man called Aiyagba, or Ajagba came from a far country called Apa. He settled in Idah and married an Okpoto woman. He was successful in war, and became Chief of the whole tribes and country”. These two traditions point at the transfer of sovereignty from an indigenous population to a few immigrant groups who eventually had power and authority relinquished to them. A more daring tradition is that which tries to find favour in the diffusionist theory as espoused by Sir Richard Palmer. The tradition holds that the Igala were of Jukun origin.

In an analysis of the Bornu from the fourteenth century, Palmer as quoted by Clifford tries to look at what he described as the “Ahel Dirk” (warrior) and the “Ahel Gara” (natives). According to him, “a branch of the Ahel Dirk of Kanem established themselves on the Benue at Wukari in the sixteenth century, and called the aborigines they found there Gara, which, by the common meta-thesis, becomes Gala. In what seems to be an affirmative statement on Palmer’s view on the link between the Igala and the Bornu region, Clifford is of the view that “the Idah Chiefdom is in some ways connected with the Jukuns Chiefdom of Wukari. There is no doubt, as also that Igala is the same name as Gara or Ngala.” He gives an account that:

The Igala chiefdom was founded by their ancestress Ebele Ejaunu, the daughter of Abutu Ejeh, a noble of the Jukun court of Wukari, who for some reasons had migrated westward along the south bank of the river Benue and had settled in the vicinity of Amageddie. At his death Ebele Ejaunu is claimed to have assembled his followers and led them southward through virgin bush till they reached Idah, where she was installed as chief with the title of *Ata* and met and married Omeppa an Aro slave, on whom she conferred the title of *Asadu*. On her death Omeppa summoned her brother Agenapoje and installed him in his sister's stead...as Ata [sic]" (Clifford 1936, p. 303)

This account has played down on the personalities of the Akpoto represented by the Igala-Mela who were believed to be the original inhabitants. The female stranger had power relinquished to her and equally saw no indigenous person to marry except an Ibo stranger to whom another important title (*Achadu*) was conferred. An indication that the indigenous populations were uncivilized as some account describes the Akpoto to such an extent that every important facet of their political lives was transferred and dominated by some stranger elements among the indigenous population. In as much as this view cannot be dismissed by a wave of hand because of the location or geographical factor and the fact that the Igala had interacted with various ethnic nationalities, it can equally not be taken as the gospel truth as Clifford wants us to believe. In the light of this argument, (Boston 1969, p. 32) is of the view that by paying special attention to the Jukun tradition of origin, Clifford gives the impression that other traditions of origin of the Igala kingship were either non-existence or else of no importance.

Another myth surrounding the historical origin of the Igala is that also recorded by Clifford. This version holds that "Agenapoje was a "sky-god" who descended miraculously upon a rock in the Niger opposite Idah and was the founder of the divine kingship under whose aegis Igala was colonized" (Clifford 1936, p. 395). This version is so mythical like the Oduduwa version of the origin of the Yoruba or Ife, that a clearer historical explanation cannot be given. It is perhaps a ploy to shy away from the lack of explanations on the probable origin of the people. The explanation that Agenapoje descended on a rock in the Niger opposite Idah, may probably, have a link with the settlement of Agenabode opposite Idah. However, research has not linked any relation between the name Agenapoje and Agenabode in the historical developments of the two areas. However, the two neighbouring areas have been interacting in several ways for several centuries.

Another version is that which explains the linguistic relationship between the Igala and Yoruba. Crowther confidently popularizes this version and believes in an ancient historical link which he claims had existed between the Igala and Yoruba

(Crowther 1970, p. 173). In Boston's view, the most definite historical statement that can be made about the Igala is that they had a common origin with the Yoruba and that the separation took place long enough ago to allow for their fairly considerable linguistic difference (Boston 1969, p. 32). In one of his versions, Crowther as quoted by Sargent stated that:

The king of Yoruba made a journey to Rabah, the old Nupe capital on the Niger, and asked the Ata to indicate a suitable place for him to settle. The Ata accordingly took a canoe and dropped down the river till he came to Idah where the Akpoto, who lived there, allowed the Yoruba king to stay. The Ata had great influence and precedence over the Akpoto. (Sargent 1974, p. 1).

This tradition presupposes that *Attah* either as a name or title existed somewhere in Raba. It is equally not clear the relationship that existed between the supposed *Attah* and the Akpoto of Idah. Therefore, this version is confusing and historically not definite. The legend does not mention the particular Yoruba king involved in the situation and was equally silent on the relationship between the *Attah* and Raba people where the unidentified Yoruba king met the *Attah*.

Another version is that of Igala-origin of Bini. This version was related by Talbot, Egharevba, Boston and later Sargent. In a successive explanation, the Igala kingship was linked to the personality of Aji-Atta purported to be a younger brother of the ruling Oba of Bini and dated around the early sixteenth century. In an attempt to find a historical relevance in this version, Sargent who appears to be the scholar who lately works on this area comes up with another historical explanation that seek to divide the origin of Igala kingship into two. According to Sargent:

It has become evident from a review of all the available literature that we are now able to resolve a long standing debate on Igala chieftaincy. On the one hand, we had J.S. Boston arguing that the Igala Monarch is of Benin origin. On the other hand, Miles Clifford, writing in 1936, argued that the monarchy was of Jukun origins. The resolution of this debate seems to emerge clearly from available evidence, including Clifford and Boston, and from some relatively new data. Therefore, it is the position of this author that there were two (at least two) dynasties in Idah, the earlier one originating from Benin, but replaced by an 'eastern' monarchy after five generations. (Sargent 1999, p. 49-49).

Sargent's strategy for providing an explanation to the historical origin of the Igala kingship is predicated on the study of the king list and other political and cultural developments amongst the neighbouring nationalities of Nupe, Bini, Agatu and Idoma within the region. According to Sargent, "it has proven possible to discuss internal Igala

history, and interpret the event more clearly through the corrective aid of neighbouring states, rather than depending exclusively upon Igala tradition (Sargent 1999, p. 49). In his analysis of the regnal kinglist through which Sargent demonstrates his idea of two dynasties for Igala monarchy, he gives a historical stretch of time between 1510-1720, a chronological dating which started with the reign of Atta-Aji (1510-1540) to the period of Abutu Ejeh (1600-1630) as representing the first phase of Igala monarchies that were linked to Benin, while the period starting from the time of Abutu Ejeh dated from the 1630A.D. as the probable period when the eastern monarchies represented by the Jukun overlordship started. This however, generated another problem that bothers on historiography and chronology. Sargent's explanation using his chronological dating failed to indicate what happened between the reign of Aji-Atta (1510-1540) which Igala oral tradition was silent about and the period 1540-1600 when Jukun influence started. Sargent's historical explanation is silent for about sixty-year gap between Aji-Atta and Abutu Eje.

What is undisputable among scholars and even the oral traditions among the Benin and Igala people is the fact that there was a war of supremacy between the *Oba* of Benin and the *Attah* of Igala. Secondly, that Benin's influence is noticed in Igala political and material culture as reflected in the pectoral mask is not arguable. Igalaland appeared to be a cosmopolitan society. This assumption is predicated on the belief that, Igalaland hosted quite array of various ethnic nationalities who by now have lost their identities and were subsumed into the Igala language. The location and waves of migrations that culminated in the formation and or birth of various ethnic nationalities gave credence to this. This factor makes it a center of not just commerce but of political developments with its influence radiating on the various ethnic nationalities occupying the general Niger-Benue Confluence area.

### Conclusion

By and large, what the various traditions point at and which seems not to be in contention is the fact that, the area east of the Niger was by no means vacuum. This shows that the area from the earliest period was occupied by a group of people known and identified as Akpoto (Okpoto). Also very many of the traditions agree that the *Attah* which came to rule and dominate the people politically was of foreign origin. The circumstances surrounding the acceptance of a foreigner to the exalted throne of *Attah* remains unravel. From all indications, in the analyses of the various theories on the evolution of the Igala people, one thing is probably certain; that is, that geography and inter-marriages have played serious roles in the relationships between the Igala and a host of other ethnic nationalities who currently have forgotten their individual identities and have come to be known generally as the Igala people.

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