

# Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi: A Pre-Historic Relationship Till Present Time

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## Abstract

This article attempts to explain the traditional origin of Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi, ancient kingdoms in the South West Nigeria. The article also sheds light on the relationship between the three kingdoms, while examining the factors that made the three kingdoms the dominant powers in the Old Oyo Empire. It is the aim of the study is to enrich the understanding of intra-group relationship among the Yoruba peoples, the relationship that has been the core reason for their longstanding union. To achieve this objective, the study employs oral traditions including songs, proverbs and interviews, and thus elicits the needed information. The challenges of oral tradition, notwithstanding, the study identifies salient issues regarding the relationship of these three classical Yoruba kingdoms.

## Introduction

The history of Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi aptly underscores the interlocked history concerning the founders of the three Yoruba kingdoms. Cities, like nations, may rise or fall, but the course of history continues interminable. In conformity with this law of historical continuity, Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi were founded and grew coincidentally in a period when the Yorubas were still struggling to be established as a nation. The three kingdoms grew to dominate power in the old Oyo Empire. The significance of these Yoruba kingdoms are aptly captured by a popular Yoruba proverb thus: “*Leyin Orun Olugbon, Orun Aresa, Orun OnIkoyi, Orun oun lori ile*”. This proverb indicates that the sun (*Orun*) was used in the ancient times as symbol of power and authority; and the proverb means that apart from the authority of *Olugbon*, of *Aresa* and of *Onikoyi*, there was no other authority on earth.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the three kingdoms of Igbon, Aresa and Ikoyi wielded power and authority surpassing other numerous kingdoms or states in ancient Yorubaland, especially in the pre-colonial period.

Being a pre-literate society the Yorubas, in order for them to put these three kingdoms in a rightful position in the Yoruba history, made sure that the fame of the kingdoms were kept in songs and sayings common in Yoruba historiography<sup>2</sup>; and till date the songs and sayings still exist in the oral tradition. A specific instance is the foray and activities of the ancient towns and their Obas (kings), the Olugbon of Igbon, the Aresa of Iresa and the Onikoyi of Ikoyi, have been recorded in songs speaking of their socio-political achievements and their economy prosperity before the 19th century political plunge.<sup>3</sup> In a reaction to social and cultural development in Igbon in the mid-16th century, the palace warden who was the repository of the kingdom’s history composed a song: “*Laye Olugbon bi koro mo lo, oro nlo nun n...*”, meaning that there was peace and prosperity in Igbon when Olugbon was the reigning king.<sup>4</sup> *Oro* being a significant popular festival in the Yoruba towns, this song describes the wish of the Yoruba people during the *Oro* festival in Igbon and Iresa in ancient times, that the *Oro* festival should not end. The duration of *Oro* festival was normally seven days, but the fanfare and ceremonies undertaken at the festival by the kings, in Igbon and Iresa, added to its beauty, and the people would not want the festival to end. The *Oro* festival should last for more than seven days. Indeed, the ancient Yoruba songs and sayings abounded in symbolism and meaningful imports. The songs and sayings expressed in clear terms the meaning of life to the people, based on their cultural values at a particular time. The Yoruba songs were also used to convey the impact of government (the reign of kings) on the economy and on the people’s social life, generally.

However, apart from these songs and sayings which have become popular in Yorubaland, significantly in reference to good or bad governance and leadership, the history of the ancient kingdoms of Igbon, Aresa and Ikoyi are yet unexplained among the histories of classical kingdoms in Yorubaland. Therefore, this study examines the relationship which had existed for centuries between the three kingdoms. It accounts for their reported association and unity, among many other Yoruba towns in Nigeria.

## Historical Background

<sup>1</sup> Oba S. A. Osunbade, Personal interview, 14/2/1995.

<sup>2</sup> Songs and poems are part of the mode of historical process and management in pre-literate Yoruba societies.

<sup>3</sup> S. A. Akintoye (2010). A History of the Yoruba people.

<sup>4</sup> Chief Akintola (76 years), personal interview on 14/3/1995.

Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi are among the various settlements described as *Yarba*<sup>1</sup> by the Hausas and other tribes before the 19th century, when the term ‘Yoruba’ became applicable to all the ethnic groups speaking the same mutually intelligible language of Yoruba. Although even at the generalization of the name to encompass all the groups, the Yoruba people groups still had a way of identifying themselves differently from one another. In fact, what became the norm at the earlier stage was a kind of identity that differentiated each of the Yoruba ethnic groups, like the Oyo-Yoruba and Ijebu-Yoruba.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the Ekitis, Ijeshas, Ijebus and Owes and Bunnus, among others, were not called Yoruba until the arrival of the Europeans in Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> The name Yoruba became generally applicable when the British authority became Nigeria’s overlord in the 19th century.<sup>4</sup> While the three kingdoms of *Igbon*, *Aresa* and *Ikoyi* were key players among the Yoruba kingdoms, they belonged to the Oyo-Yoruba extraction. This was their identity until the 19th century civil wars that ravaged Yorubaland and finally subsumed it under colonial hegemony culminating in the creation Nigeria.

Today, Igbon is located along Ogbomoso-Ilorin highway. Igbon is presently under the Surulere Local Government Area of Oyo State. It is about 10km north of Ogbomoso. The social change necessitated by the political upheavals of the 19th century led to the emigration of the people of Igbon kingdom to other towns, including Ogbomoso and Oko. Oko and Ogbomosho that were believed could offer protection particularly to the ravaging Fulani had depopulated Igbon town. For continuity and in the attempt to remember the antecedents of these towns, the town was renamed *Orile-Igbon*, meaning the homestead of Igbons.<sup>5</sup> Iresa can be found along Ogbomoso-Ikirun highway. The Iresa people are now of two groups, the Iresa Adu and Iresa Apa. Iresa Adu is the headquarters of Surulere Local Government of Oyo State. It is about 10km, east of Ogbomoso. Ikoyi is situated along Ogbomoso-Igbeti highway. It is the headquarters of Orile Local Government of Oyo State. It is about 10km west of Ogbomoso.<sup>6</sup>

As earlier mentioned, Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi are some of the Yoruba kingdoms whose histories dated back to the earliest period of the Yoruba nation. In order to bring out the relationship of the three ancient Yoruba towns, their traditional origins have to be explained.

### **Igbon**

Igbon is believed to be founded by a brave, adventurous prince of Ife called Ese. Ese was an Ife prince belonging to the Oduduwa dynasty. While in Ife he was the titular head (called Olu in Yoruba) of his quarter or ward called *Ogbon Morun*. Thus, as the head of the Ogbon Morun quarter, he was called *Olu Igbon* or *Olu Igbon of Morun*. However, when Ife princes emigrated from Ile-Ife to found towns where they could rule and exercise authority independent of Ife, Ese the Olu Igbon (called Olu Igbon Ese too) also emigrated from Ife, following the migration of King (Alaafin) Oranmiyan his regal brother from Ife to found Oyo Ile. His migration from with the Alaafin Oranmiyan earned him the appellation of “*Ntele-Alaafin*”, meaning *Alaafin’s* deputy.

Eventually, Olu Igbon Ese and his followers founded and settled in a place he called Igbon. When the new town of Igbon was established, Ese’s title of Olu Igbon was contracted and it became Olugbon.<sup>7</sup> Due to the fact that Ese left Ile-Ife as a king, he carried along all the paraphernalia of kingship from Ogbo-Morun in Ife to Igbon, his new settlement. Thus, he was naturally and traditionally conferred with the kingship, the Oba Olugbon of Igbon. And his throne in Igbon received the blessing of Alaafin Oranmiyan, the King at Oyo-Ile.

### **Iresa**

Iresa was believed to have been founded by a prince of Ife called Aasa. The period when Aasa left Ife-Ife was uncertain, but it was reckoned to be after Olu-Ogbon Ese’s migration out of Ile-Ife.<sup>8</sup> Aasa, according to the tradition, was said to have left Ife without given his followers any information about his journey. After his departure, his followers had started looking for him. In the course of searching for him, those who met Aasa’s followers or crossed their part were said to have asked what they were seeking. They had answered they were seeking for Aasa; consequently, the name of the first settlement where they finally met Aasa was called Ipasa. Aasa however left the Ipasa settlement for another place when he had some challenges, and founded another settlement where he became old and died. For his remembrance his relatives called that last settlement of Aasa

<sup>1</sup> S. Johnson (1921). History of the Yorubas, CMS, Lagos Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> G. O. I. Olomola (1977). “Pre-Colonial Patterns of Inter-State Relations in Eastern Yorubaland”, Ph.D thesis, University of Ife, Ile-Ife.

<sup>3</sup> Ade Obayemi (1981). “The Yoruba and Edo-Speaking Peoples and their Neighbours before 1600”, in J. F. A. Ajayi and Micheal Crowder (Eds.), History of West Africa, Vol. 1, Longman, U.K., pp. 196-263.

<sup>4</sup> S. Johnson (1921). History of the Yorubas. CMS, Lagos, Nigeria.

<sup>5</sup> Olugbon of Orile Igbon, Oba S. A. Osunbade. Olugbon of Igbon – Personal interview, on 14/2/ 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Oyo State Local government gazette.

<sup>7</sup> Olugbon of Orile Igbon, Oba S. A. Osunbade. Olugbon of Igbon – Personal interview on 14/2/1995.

<sup>8</sup> Oba Emiolu II, Aresa of Iresa – Evidence before Akin Oloko Commission Enquiry Sitting, at Iresa Adu, Oyo State on the 10/10/1994.

Ire Aasa (that is, where Aasa was tired), simply Iresa.<sup>1</sup>

It is equally noteworthy that before Aasa's death, he had four sons and one daughter. Two of his sons and the daughter became mythological characters. One was deified as the river Ekoru and the other son as Egbedi Gun Aree (Ina). Meanwhile, the daughter Alake Odi became the river Ateere Ajeje (Omo Abo Aasa) and succeeded Aasa. When Alake Odi died, Ase the younger son of Aasa succeeded his brother as the Aresa of Iresa. Moreover, Ikin was one of the Aresa that reigned after Ase. Ikin has twin sons, according to the tradition. The first of the twins, Taiwo was called Obatuapa or Aresa Adu while the second, Kehinde was Opalala or Aresa Apa. The immediate younger brother of these twins, Idowu, according to the story, was called Inisa. It was Idowu that founded the town of Inisa.<sup>2</sup>

When it was time for Obatuapa to become Aresa, he insisted that Opalala his twin brother must also be made a king. Therefore, the Aresa territories were divided into two between Obatuala and Opalala. The two towns regarded themselves as one and they bore the same Orile cognomen, which is 'Odi'. In addition, the traditional account indicates that Omoninla who was the mother of Soun Ogunlola (Ogundiran Aisa Agbe's father) was a younger sister of the trio of Obatuala, Opalala and Inisa, all children of Aresa Ikin.

In the traditional account of the origin of Ikoyi, Jegbe the son of Alaaafin of Oyo-Ile went on a hunting expedition to an area very close to the River Niger or Oya, where he established a town.<sup>3</sup> The account does not give the name of the town, possibly because Jegbe had not become a king then. The history continues that when the Tapas invaded the Kingdom of Oyo and overwhelmed it Alaaafin sent for Jegbe's successor Adebessin Olugbenra for aids against the Tapas. With Adebessin's aid, Alaaafin was able to subdue the Tapas, and since then Adebessin had to stay in Oyo-Ile accompanying Alaaafin. Subsequently, the kings (Obas) and head chiefs (Bales) under Oyo-Ile, popularly called *Ekun Osi*, went to Oyo-Ile to pay homage to Alaaafin. Among them was Olugbon Elente, but he did not return to Igbon. This made the kings and head chiefs (Bales) decided not to go in person to Oyo-Ile anymore.

In the course of the history, epidemic and restlessness befell the Ekun-Osi towns and villages. When the Ifa oracle was consulted, the oracle posited that the whole problem was caused by the Ekun-Osi's refusal to go to Oyo-Ile and pay allegiance to Alaaafin. For them to remove or lessen the wrath of the gods, the Obas and Bales must resume their homage-paying to the Alaaafin.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the Obas and Bales decided to go to Oyo-Ile in obedience to the oracle. On their way to Oyo-Ile, the Obas and Bales numbering about one thousand and five hundred missed the way;<sup>5</sup> it was long since they visited Oyo-Ile. Thus, in dilemma, they saw Adebessin Olugbenra hunting, and inquired from him about the road leading to Oyo-Ile. Implored, Adebessin Olugbenra agreed to lead them if only they would give him the kind of royal paraphernalia worn by them; he also would look like an Oba, thereby. Crown, horse-tail, she made of beads, necklace of beads and staffs of beads were given to Adebessin Olugbenra, so that leading them he would look like an Oba too.

When they got to the gate of Oyo-Ile, Adebessin asked them to tarry for him to go and inform Alaaafin of their presence.<sup>6</sup> Seeing them, Alaaafin was thrilled, and he asked Adebessin that "*Nibo logbe koyi?*", meaning 'Where did you meet them?' Since that time, the place where Adebessin Olugbenra met the Ekun Osi has been known as Ikoyi. And Adebessin, the son of Jegbe, and grandson of Alaaafin, was made an Oba upon the request of the Obas and Baales from the Ekun-Osi to the Alaaafin; he was enthroned the Onikoyi of Ikoyi, where he met the Obas and Bales. In addition, Alaaafin also proclaimed that Onikoyi should be leading the Obas and Bales, the Ekun-Osi, to Oyo-Ile, as from that time.

### **Diplomatic Relationship between Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi**

The survey of the traditional origin of the kingdoms of Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi shows that their founders had their origin as Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba race. While Olugbon Ese who founded Igbon and Asa who founded Iresa were Ife princes leaving Ife and establishing their towns or kingdoms, Adebessin Olugbenra, the son of Jegbe, was a grandson of Alaaafin and thus descendant of Oduduwa, the first king at Ile-Ife. Going by the account, the three towns and their rulers, Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi, had common ancestry, in a nutshell.

Secondly, the Yoruba oral tradition and history surveyed reveals that Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi were variously born of the same mother. Based on age, the Olugbon of Igbon being the eldest was accordingly accorded the social primacy. This is depicted in the Yoruba saying that "*Olugbon legbon, Aresa laburo, Onikoyi leketa won lenjelenje*", translating 'Olugbon is the eldest, Aresa follows, and Onikoyi was the youngest of them', in corroboration to the fact. Indeed, the Yorubas will say "*Eniti o ki Olugbon ti ko kii Onikoyi O ta ara re je*", translating 'He who praises Olugbon without praising Onikoyi deceives himself', and stressing the social

<sup>1</sup> Oyerinde (1934). Iwe Itan Ogbomoso. Niger Press, Jos, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Oyerinde (1934). Iwe Itan Ogbomoso. Niger Press, Jos, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Chief Ifayemi Elebuibon (68 years). Personal interview on 10/2/2013.

<sup>4</sup> Oyerinde (1934). Iwe Itan Ogbomoso. Niger Press, Jos, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Onikoyi of Ikoyi Ile (80 years). Personal interview on 12/3/1995.

<sup>6</sup> Ojo Samuel (Baba Shaki) (1951). Iwe Itan Yoruba, Apa Kinnin. Oyo, p. 73.

precedence of Olugbon.

Thirdly, the traditional relationship between these three ancient Yoruba kings and of their towns is buttressed in certain elements of the traditional religion commonly embraced among the people of Igbon, Ikoyi and Iresa. For example, Ogun, Obatala, Sango and Esu, among others, were worshiped by the people of the towns. Also, Yoruba festivals including *Oro* are popularly celebrated in all of Igbon, Ikoyi and Iresa towns. In this regard, the Yoruba will say that “*Olugbon on ni ki oro ko mo kije, Aresa o ni ki oro ko mo kije*”, meaning ‘Olugbon festival must run for seven days, Aresa festival must run for seven days’. The seven days duration of the festival dictated by the Obas Olugbon and Aresa show the power they wielded, considering that the lesser Obas and their people could not afford so long days of festivities but observe the festival for one or two days. Also, seven days duration make the success of the festival doubly sure. Really, if the duration is not up to seven days the festival is considered to have failed.

There is another Yoruba saying that “*Laye Olugbon bi koro malo...Laye Aresa bi koro malo*”, suggesting that the Oro festival is an important festival celebrated by all major Yoruba Obas, particularly Olugbon and Aresa. This explains why Olugbon and Aresa’s Oro festival must last for seven days, and it is similarly enjoyed by the people that they wish that the festival should last much longer.

Fourthly, concerning their language, the three towns of Igbon, Ikoyi and Iresa had the same language, originally the Oyo dialect. Their linguistic affinity further confirms the traditional relationship of the towns, Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi.

Fifthly, there is evidence of intermarriage among the peoples of these towns. In particular, the oral tradition indicates that Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi gave out their daughters in marriage to one another. For instance, in the traditional account Soun Ogunlola (Ogundiran Aisa Agbe’s father) (Abonningunle) was absorbed into the family of Olugbon of Igbon. Soun was given Omoninla the daughter of Aresa as wife. In the same vein, the mother of Olugbon Olugbade Atanda Agbe who led the Igbons to Ogbomoso was a daughter of Onikoyi. Olugbade’s cognomen thus confirms:

*Ikoyi ni Ile Iya  
Igbon ni Ile Baba  
To bi o lomo*

This translates as:

Ikoyi was your mother’s home  
Igbon was your father’s home  
That gave birth to you.

Sixthly, another feature of the traditional relationship between Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi is the shared facial marks. That is to say, facial marks are a cultural characteristic common to all the towns. The marks are variously used for easy identification of the bearer, as well as for beautification. Abaja, Abaja-merin, Abaja Alagbede and Gombo or Bamu are the types of facial marks common among these towns.

Certainly, Igbon, Ikoyi and Iresa were politically independent of one another. Nevertheless, they were equally subservient to the Alaafin at Oyo-Ile. Also, the three kings acknowledged the political leadership of Alaafin paying him annual homage and tributes in the Oyo kingdom. The oral tradition supported that the Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi were “*Oba Alade*”, that is, kings with beaded crowns. They belonged to the nobility class in the classical empire of Oyo. Others in this class were Olofa of Ofa and Timi of Ede, although the Olugbon of Igbon, Aresa of Iresa and Onikoyi of Ikoyi were the most ancient Yoruba kingship. In fact, the Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi were provincial governors in the ancient Oyo Empire. While the Olugbon was the suzerain in the Ekun-Osi, Onikoyi was the governor of Ekun-Otun, and Aresa was the overlord of Ekun-Ibolo. Hence, that Olugbon of Igbon together with his two brothers Aresa of Iresa and Onikoyi of Ikoyi held the monopoly of power and authority in the traditional state of the Oyo Empire is indubitable.<sup>1</sup>

It is noteworthy that the Yoruba ancestors spoke of the sun as symbolizing power and authority: “*leyin oorun Olugbon, oorun Aresa, oorun Onikoyi, Oorun tan lori ile*”. The saying implies that apart from the sun (oorun) or authority of Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi, there is no other authority on earth, emphasizing that the three Obas and their territories were politically equal (or similarly independent), the social and cultural precedence of Olugbon, notwithstanding. All of them were very important in the provincial organization of the old Oyo Empire.

Specifically, the three Obas were regarded as the “*Baba Ogun*”, the defender of the Alaafin and the Oyo Empire. Onikoyi general military commander of a top imperial brigade of Oyo. There is the saying too that “*Gbogbo won je olori ogun, omo Erelu saakin*”, translating the child of seventy warlords, the child of Erelu saakin’. Onikoyi, too, was a head of the *Eso*. In this respect, the Yorubas chanted:

So Ikoyi Omo Agbonlona  
So ko riku sa

<sup>1</sup> Oba S. A. Osunbade. Personal interview on 14/2/1995.

So ki gboofa leyin  
Iwaju ni yanbi Olu ti igb' ita.  
Eso to ba gbofa leyin a je p' osagun ni.<sup>1</sup>

Aresa too was a head of the *Eso*. In the oral tradition, Olugbon, Onikoyi and Aresa did go to war together in the ancient times.<sup>2</sup> The monarchical system of government was practised in their towns alike. The Oba was at the apex of the traditional political system; under the Oba was the Council of Chiefs known as "*Ilus*" or '*Ijajes*'; and representing the Obas at the tributary towns and villages were the Bales. In the tributary towns, while the Bale is the head, he is followed by heads of the families, and then the town's people. This was the general structure in all the three towns of Igbon, Ikoyi and Iresa.

The survey of the traditional account of the origin of the the towns, Igbon, Ikoyo and Iresa, also indicates the feature of a similar judicial system. The Obas of these towns constituted the highest judicial authorities in their territories. It was only offences that involved murder they referred to the Alaafin at Oyo-Ile, who was the supreme authority of Oyo Empire. Nevertheless, the three Obas Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi coordinated their provinces within the old Oyo Empire at the pleasure of the Alaafin. They, in particular, made various demand of yams, palm oil, goats and *bere* grass to be taken to Oyo-Ile as part of their community's contribution to the upkeep of the Alaafin's palace. The other lesser Obas (kings without crowns of beads) and the Bales in their towns could only see the Alaafin through Olugbon, Aresa and Onikoyi.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

In this study, the relationship among the three towns of Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi has been discussed. It is established the towns, Igbon, Iresa and Ikoyi have inseparable traditional link, and this cut across social, political and cultural dimensions. It is revealed that as a matter of fact, the towns were built on a common maternal ancestry which unified them, such that they did not suffer any serious decline all through the incessant political changes and social developments in the individual towns. Corroborating their cohesive relationship is that it was and is hard to mention one of the Obas without mentioning the other two. And up till this day, the relationship between the Obas and their towns has carried on. No doubt, in the history of Yoruba people, the people have always seen themselves as one family of a common cradle, Ile-Ife. Meanwhile, Ile-Ife among the other Yoruba towns has been given greater respect, because it gave birth to the others and their emerged cultures.

### End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Onikoyi's Cognomen

<sup>2</sup> Adeoye C.L. *Asa ati Ise Yoruba* pp.300.

<sup>3</sup> Oba S. A. Osunbade, Personal interview, 14/2/1995.



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