



THE TSOEDE FACTOR IN THE EMERGENCE OF CENTRAL POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN NUPELAND, 1463 1591 AD

OBA RAHAMAN TAIWO

Department of History, Federal College of Education, Kontagora

Abstract

This attempt is premised on the fact that the history of a people and their polity can never be complete without tracing and linking the early past with its subsequent and contemporary periods. The Nupe, being one of the major ethnics groups in Nigeria, which had evolved formidable politics in the past, requires the attention of researchers and scholars to create a historic link between its earlier past (pre-Tsoede period) on the one hand, and post-Tsoede and contemporary periods on the other. The major task of this study is focus on the pre-Tsoede and Tsoede eras of Nupe history with a view to unearthing what life was then and how such facilitated subsequent developments. In this respect, the study will examine and re-examine the political, socioeconomic and cultural processes and practices in Nupeland prior to the emergence of Tsoede who was said to have established a Supra Nupe Kingdom around the 16th century AD. The study will focus on the Tsoede factor in the emergence of central political organization in nupeland as well as migration, expansion and consolidation, which became a building block between its past and contemporary period.

Keywords: Tsoede, Emergence, Central, Political, Organization

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important personalities associated With Nupe history was Tsoede or Edegi. This personality has been given much emphasis by traditions and 19th and 20th Century European writers, Christian missionaries and later, colonial administrators. There works have given the impression that there had never been Nupe history prior to the emergence of Tsoede. Both Ndagi and Obayemi lament this erroneous view. According to the latter, "the overwhelming belief and commitment to the Tsoede factor in the history of Nupe has enjoyed political and cultural supremacy so much that it has obscured the identification, insight and study of the pre Tsoede Nupe history".¹

In discussing the foundation of Nupe Kingdom therefore, the personality of Tsoede occupies a commanding position. Our understanding of this phenomenon becomes

imperative to enable us re-examine the 'myth' or historicity surrounding Tsoede in the early history of Nupeland, particularly with regard to its relationship with Igalaland and other neighbors in general.

TSOEDE'S BIRTH AND THE SURROUNDING 'MYTH'

As for Tsoede's parents, most traditions, with one or two exceptions, linked his father to Prince Ayegba-the son to the 3rd or 4th Attah of Igalaland called Idoko.² Ayegba used to travel to Kin Nupe on hunting and magical expedition. It was during one of such expeditions that he was said to have got married to an Nku princess called Mama-one of the daughters of Tsunukw the king of Nku-called Zubairu Gana.³ Prince Ayegba had to travel back to Idah on hearing about the sickness of his father, Idoko. He left behind his pregnant wife at Nku to whom he gave a charm and an identification mark (a piece of red cloth) to hang on the child whenever it was born, so goes the tradition.

On the death of Attah Idoko, Ayegba became his successor at Idah. It had been the traditional practice that annual tribute in form of slaves would be sent to Idah from subject areas, including 'Nupeland', At the age of thirty years, Tsoede; together with others happened to be among the tribute sent to Idah from Nupe. On getting there the Attah, the acclaimed father recognized 'his son' Tsoede, who was said to have been singled out for special favour to the jealousy and dislike of other half-brothers. Tsoede is reported to have performed wonders and magical feats to save his 'father' from sickness and imminent defeat of Igalaland by the Jukun who were at war with each other.⁴ One of the achievements that the traditions ascribed to Tsoede was his bravery of catching a bunch of thorny palm fruits from the top of palm tree without allowing them to reach the ground. He undertook this challenging task to be able to meet the medicine men's condition to cure his father's ailment. In the process of catching the thorny bunch of the fruits, he is said to have sustained some injuries including the cutting and splitting of his Upper lip,⁵ known in Nupe as Tsoede, in addition to some other injuries and scars on his stomach and cheeks. Since that incident, any child born, with a split upper lip in Nupeland is called Tsoede.

To a very large extent, people born within the royal nobility, particularly a section of Nupe-Patigi, are given bold tribal marks on one of their cheeks Eyesa and chin/jaw called nungbeka. This is to identify them as descendants of the eclipsed Tsoede ruling dynasty which was regenerated in Patigi in 1898 by establishing a separate emirate out of Bida's Fulbe emirate by the British colonial administration in Bida.⁶ The practice may have been dying down or reduced to the barest minimum, perhaps, due to the influence of Islamic religion and Western culture.

TSOEDE CONNECTION WITH IDAH AND THE RETURN TO NUPELAND

When Attah Gara Idoko was finally sensing his death, he advised Tsoede to return to his maternal land, Nupe, to avoid the already existing hatred and jealousy between him and

his half brothers. Traditions have it that Tsoede left Idah with various riches, a bronze canoe with twelve Nupe slaves to man it and various insignia of kinship. These included a long trumpet-kakaki, state drums-Kpadondo and Enyadukum, pot drum with brass bells and a heavy chain and fetters called Egban-Tsoede as symbols of his political and judicial powers.⁷ This was to prepare Tsoede for the great task of founding his dynasty in Nupeland, the land which is said to have been given to him by 'his father' as "a parting gift".⁸ The source under reference would seem to assume the sovereignty of Attah Gara over Nupe-land, hence, regarding it as his subject land. Sensing the secret plan between Tsoede and his father; the other half brothers are said to have given the former a hot chase upstream to possibly kill him and return the so-called royal gifts to Idah. Among the pursuing brothers were: Akwumabi, Akogwu, Ogado, Aidoko and Ohiemi Ochohi.⁹ The pursuit was not successful, as Tsoede eventually reached Nupeland after which he began the process of building a supra state-Nupe Kingdom. Based on our present state of knowledge, we do not have evidence to prove whether or not there was a physical fight between Tsoede and his half-brothers before the former left Idah for Nupeland. It is suggested however, that Tsoede participated in the war between Jukun and Igala on the side of the latter to defeat the former.

Other similar or divergent traditions in connection with Tosede-Idah relationships exist. Boston, for instance, suggests that Tsoede was a Nupe hunter, warrior and magician.¹⁰ He might have used these talents to assist his hosts at Idah to cure the Attah of an ailment in addition to his heroic participation on the side of his hosts to free Igalaland from the imperialistic tendency of the Jukun. A recent tradition collected from Nku, by us¹¹ states that from time immemorial a brotherly relationship existed between Nupeland and Igalaland based, not on slave-mastership respectively, as is commonly believed. The legend claims that on the migration of the Nupe from the East, Saudi Arabia, the eldest of the migrating group, after several years of travel from the East, could not continue due to old age. Hence, he decided to settle and 'found', what came to be Igalaland. The other members of the group continued until they reached Nku which tradition claims to be the first Bini settlement in the entire Nupeland. From there, emerged other Nupe settlements such as Doko, Gaba, Essan, Tafien, Nupeko, Tuwagi and Bida-Bani, which, according to the, same tradition, formed the nucleus or the aboriginal Bini Towns or settlements. The homage and annual payment of tribute to Idah, therefore, was not and should not be taken as master-slave relationship, but rather, as a symbol of respect for seniority for which Nupe has been known.¹² Tsoede only escorted the tribute to Idah, but never ever was a slave himself, so this legend claims. That, Tsoede was never a son to an Igala Prince Idoko, as is generally claimed. Rather, both his parents and grand-parents were Bini from Nku settlement. Names of Zubairu Gana and princess Mama have been given as Tsoede's father and mother respectively.¹³

Another source¹⁴ argues against the servant-master relationship commonly believed to have existed between Nupe and Igala. It argues that prior to the emergence of Tsoede,

there existed in central Nupeland powerful polities such as 'Atagara' empire and 'Bini' confederacy-the former being older and greater than the latter. This is why the Nupe traditions in the story of Tsoede maintain that the Bini Confederacy had to pay tribute to the Atagara. According to this source, the ancient Atagara Empire in central Nupeland of old was 'mistaken' for the modern Atagara of Igalaland with headquarters at Idah, claiming that it was the king of the Atagara of Nupe that was Tsoede's father. Hence, referring to Tsoede as the son of Attagara.¹⁵

However, based on the traditional brotherly relationship between Igala and Nupe, exchange of occasional visits used to be the practice between the two areas. It was in this process, as the tradition goes, that a prince from Idah called Aliyu-most probably the same as Ayegba earlier mentioned, became a regular visitor to Nku in Nupeland as Tsoede might have been to Idah in Igalaland. The Prince is said to have become very close to Etsu-Nku's daughter-Princess Mama. Traditions differ as to the nature of the closeness. One states that the Idah Prince got married to the Nku princess-and the marriage being blessed with a son called Saba or Moh'd Saba,¹⁶ but later Tsoede. The other believes that there was no marriage between the two of that the Idah prince, being a hunter and magician was approached by the princess, when she became pregnant, to pray for her to have surviving child(ren) after having lost all her previous six children.¹⁷ The Idah Prince obliged. The first-tradition appears more popular and generally acceptable to the generality of the Nupe and Igala.

In each case, however, it is generally an accepted tradition that the prince prepared a charm with an instruction which he gave to the pregnant princess when he was leaving Nupe for Idah on the news of his father's sickness. Prince 'Aliyu' succeeded his father as the new Attah of Igala after the former's death. But to what extent can these claims stand as historical facts cannot easily be determined with certainty. However, contacts between Nupe and Igala lands from time immemorial, especially on commercial and trading activities, cannot be dismissed. Rivers Niger and Kaduna provided easy access between the two areas and according to Ohiare,¹⁸ traffic on the two rivers meant human contacts as well as trade and commerce.

FOUNDATION OF A CENTRAL NUPE KINGDOM

The emergence of several Kingdoms, Empires, States or Chiefdoms in the Nigerian area has been attributed to one legendary figure or another. For Instance, the establishment of Hausa State; Oyo empire; Kanem and Burma empire; Benin Kingdom among others, has been associated with Bayajida; Oduduwa. Sayf bn Dhi Yazan and Oranmiyan, respectively.¹⁹In the same vein, the foundation of Nupe Kingdom is attributed to Tsoede. The transformation of a mini-state or village group into kingdom/empire involves the interplay of a number of forces. One major effective dynamics of change that led to the transformation of the hitherto mini-state structure in Nupeland to a mega-one presented

itself to Tsoede. This was essentially the absence of unity among various Nupe sub-groups and lack of a standing army.

Prior to the emergence of Tsoede in Nupeland to establish a central state, there existed in antiquity various independent or semi-independent polities.²⁰ Such polities had related among themselves and between them and other places outside the frontier of Nupeland. Obayemi, for instance, notes that Nupeland had established relations with places such as Hausa and Yoruba lands before the appearance of Tsoede. Nupeland had also engaged in exchange of trade goods with neighbours and distant peoples. It is reported that “previous to Edegi (Tsoede), one Etsu Jiga (Jegu?) at Raba had ravaged the Yorubas on the opposite bank (Ilorin) and sacked Oyo.²¹ Raba was one of the important riverine Nupe towns and centre of trade and commerce in the early time. There were also reports of early relations between Nupe and Hausalands, especially with Katsina and Kano, among others. Trade and commerce can be said to have been fundamental factors for establishing such relations. Efforts to guard and promote economic relations are said to have led to wars between the Nupe and the Hausa, probably to exert economic and or political superiority over each other.²² Back to our discussion on Tsoede. On arrival to Nupeland, Tsoede is reported to have engaged his maternal uncle the then Etsu-Nku -King of Nku, in a struggle, aimed at taking over the mantle of leadership from him. This marked the beginning of his conquest and unification ambitions. This, according to tradition, was to pay back his uncle for sending him (Tsoede) to Idah as tribute.²³ Tsoede might not have known that it was his mother -then late, that is said to have requested that her son be among those to be sent, to create an opportunity for him to meet with his ‘father’ who had become the Attah Igala.²⁴ The circumstances and details of the so-called struggle between Tsoede and his uncle are sketchy. However, a tradition collected from Nku town states that it was a taboo for fellow kinsmen to go to war with each other. But Tsoede-the Amagi -nephew to the Etsu would not listen. In order to avoid breaking the tradition or possibility of defeat in the hands of his nephew, Tsunku Daudu Maza, together with his followers, had to tlee Nku to a nearby river called Guntsuwa.²⁵ According to tradition this river into which they disappeared is still ‘harboring them alive’ since there is no news or evidence of their death. That as a mark of honour, sound of drum beat and trumpet blowing are believed to have been heard every Thursday night and Friday morning to signify their ‘continuous existence.’ The tradition under reference also believes that no legitimate successors of Tsunku-Nku king, could go to River Guntsuwa and come back alive-believing that the same fate that befell their predecessor would befall them too-disappearance into the river forever. Taking the drum beat and trumpet blowing to be true counters some claims that Tsoede brought them from Idah as part of the royal insignia given to him by the Attah. According to Nku tradition, the first king-Emu of Nku by name Baba-Kuku was the first to have trumpet-Kakaki as a symbol of royalty. This had been in practice long before Tsoede’s emergence. The weekly drum-beating and trumpet blowing ceremony is called Ekatu.²⁵-Royal Remembrance.

This has become a legacy that has continued to be in practice in most present-day reigning royal houses in Nupeland. No wonder, up till now, every female descendant from either paternal or maternal side of the present day royal houses in Nupeland must be accompanied during marriage to their husbands houses with trumpet-Kakaki' blowing and drum beat-*Kpandondo*. This is to distinguish them from non-royal ordinary people-talakazhi.

After the defeat of his uncle or his 'mysterious' disappearance, Tsoede first established his capital at Nupeko town. Here, the process of finding a supra state began by making efforts to unify the hitherto independent or semi-independent Bini city-states and other groups of Nupe. Having achieved this, he declared himself as the overall Etsu of a more suitable the united Nupeland. The initial capital at Nupeko was moved to Gbara-a more suitable political and administrative terrain in 1497.²⁷

THE TSOEDE PHENOMENON AND ITS LEGACY

On returning to Nupeland from Idah as noted earlier, Tsoede's major aim was to unite, both by persuasion and subjugation, the various Nupe sub-groups, to form a larger and more powerful polity. Details of the processes and conquests of the groups may be unknown to us. A source, however, suggests that it was not difficult to subdue the Bini group-probably due to lack of a standing army, and the Kyadya sub-group, suggestively due to the guarantee for the continuity of their administrative systems under the Kuta.²⁸ The subjugation of the other sub-groups might not be as easy as the first two mentioned above. The leadership of the new political order is said to have waged series of wars to bring them under the central authority.²⁹ The foundation of the new central ruling authority under the leadership of Tsoede appears to be the most important achievements associated with him. Commenting on this, Idrees says the

*Edegi (tsoede) phenomenon, whether mythical or real, stands to represent a revolutionary introduction of a new political order that overwhelmed the Bini confederacy. Under the new dispensation, the Primacy Tafyan had enjoyed earlier was taken over by Nupeko which assumed the role of a new administrative capital.*³⁰

Before the emergence of Tsoede as a mega-state builder, Tafyan town served as what seemed to be the 'capital' town of the Bini confederacy. Other members of the league used to pay tribute to the Etsu king of Tafyan, even though they enjoyed some measure of independence politically, economically and socially. It was only at war times, or imminent threat of them against the confederacy, that a 'temporary' joint military force, far from being a 'standing army', would have been formed to fight the common enemy. This political situation appears similar to the pre-Attahship period in Igala history.³¹ As we had twelve Bini city-states in pre-Tsoede era, so also was the reported existence of Igala-Mela meaning "the nine Igala".³² They settled at different times at different parts of Igalaland or within the vicinity of Idah under the eventual leadership of Etemaihi?" As

the Bini confederacy became a territorial entity, so also did the Igala-mela create a territory within which each clan appeared independent of the other. Apart from the Bini settlements which formed a confederacy, there were other independent or semi independent Nupe sub-group settlements prior to the emergence of Tsoede in Nupeland, which included Kyadya, Batachi, Gbedegi, Checkpan, Ebangi and Kusopa. The same situation would seem to have applied to Igalaland before the emergence of Attahship institution. Ukwedeh lists other settlements apart from the Igala-Mela and Igala-nga as Atankpa, Ayigagwu, Ihiake, Odo-Heme, Achikwu and Ukwo,³³ found on the Ibaji area of the southern part of the Idah plains near big bodies of water. These seemingly independent settlements, lacking unity and standing army might have facilitated the establishment of centralized politics in Nupeland and Igala Kingdoms by Tsoede and Attah Ayegba Om'Idoko respectively.

It is, however, argued that despite the apparent lack of unity and central authority, by the time Tsoede emerged as a unifier of the many independent or semi-independent mini-states, centres of local authorities were gradually emerging.³⁴ Quite clearly, therefore, the Nupe political system was gradually "evolving from being an isolated independent village-level organization to a larger union on a wider scale."³⁵ Prior to the emergence of Tsoede dynasty, at least three distinctive administrative patterns had existed. These were the Bini Confederacy, the riverine Kyadya polity and the Batachi.³⁶ This form of organization would seem to have survived up to the period of Tsoede, advantage of which might have been taken by the emergent political systems. For, it is suggested that,

The Nupe mega-state that emerged had evolved from village-level organization and Tsoede was the catalyst in that process of political evolution... Even without Tsoede, a mega-state was certain to have (eventually) emerged in the Niger-Kaduna confluence region. This is not however a denial that Tsoede and his associates, the Kyede, played Significant role in the establishment and development of the Nupe Kingdom... Their task was made much easier by the political forces that were operative at the time of their advent in the Middle Niger region.³⁶

Having successfully created a larger polity internally, starting from the defeat of his maternal uncle, Daudu Maza -the then Etsu of Nku town, to the subjugation of other Nupe subgroups, Tsoede proclaimed himself the Etsu of the entire Nupeland. His next area offocus was territorial expansion beyond the frontiers of Nupeland. Towards this end, he is reported to have successfully waged wars on the neighbouring states.³⁷ These included Yagba, Bunu, Kakanda, Akoko, Kambari and Kamuku.³⁷ However, Ohiare does not seem to accept the fact that Tsoede ever embarked on any territorial expansion outside Nupeland. According to him, "Tsoede had enough internal problems to contend with, which could not have allowed him to dissipate his energy "embarking on expansionist policy outside Nupe".³⁸ He argues that apart from forming a state out of Bini Confederacy, Tsoede had the problem of consolidating the newly found dynasty, as according to him, some of the Nupe sub-groups, such as the "Ganagana did not seem to acknowledge one centralized authority founded by Tsoede.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Tsoede as the revolutionary empire builder can be seen as an important epoch in Nupe History. The hitherto various independent sub groups and their polities, such as Bini, Kyadya, Kusopa, Ebangi among others were united by Tsoede to form supra Nupe Kingdom. Such a kingdom is believed to have lasted for between 300 and 500 years before its eclipse in the beginning of the 19th century with the intervention of the 19th century jihad campaigners. Before then, Nupe kingdom under its founder-Tsoede and his descendants extended beyond the core Nupeland to demonstrate its political superiority, military prowess and strength over such non Nupe areas.

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