

RECLAIMING ILORIN: OLD OYO-ILE DIASPORA, IDENTITY, AND POWER IN A FRONTIER YORUBA CITY (1823–2003)

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Abstract

This study examined the history of the Old Oyo-Ile Diaspora, with emphasis on Ilorin from 1823 to 2003. The emergence of Ilorin as an independent entity out of the Old Oyo Empire could not have been possible without the help of the Fulani elements who were invited by Afonja to Ilorin. Ilorin was and is a Yoruba town, but appears to be erroneously regarded as a Hausa-Fulani society in which its Diaspora contributions in the development of Nigeria become exempted from such productivity. The study is a modest attempt to breakdown such subsumed understanding which present Oyo-Ile as a distinct group in Ilorin. This is significant as it assesses the impact of Oyo-Ile Diaspora on the broader Yoruba nationality and will contribute to the understanding of the historical process of migration and Diaspora within the context of old Oyo-Ile. The data for this study were generated through the primary source of oral traditions and ethnography as well as the secondary sources of published works and unpublished texts. The study adopted a descriptive historical method. The theoretical framework guiding the present study centered on analysis with frameworks of functionalism, conflict theory, national development and migration. The series of the quadruple connections they share become difficult to divorce and provided the flexible nexus which is apt in holding together the different dimensions of the study. The findings revealed that Ilorin was not founded by the Hausa-Fulani elements. It also revealed that Oyo-Ile Diaspora community have contributed immensely to the development of the Nigerian nation and thus deserve an appropriate place in the history of Nigeria. The study therefore, recommends that the study of Ilorin, with respect to Oyo-Ile/Afonja and their historical antecedents be encouraged and promoted in institutions of learning and administration.

Keywords: Ilorin, Old Oyo Empire, Afonja, Yoruba Diaspora, Fulani Emirate, Identity.

I. Introduction

Ilorin occupies a deeply contested place in Nigerian and Yoruba historiography. Located at the northern frontier of Yorubaland, Ilorin is today politically and symbolically associated with the Hausa-Fulani emirate system, yet historically it emerged as a Yoruba settlement within the Old Oyo imperial system. This contradiction has produced what may be described as a crisis of historical memory, in which the foundational role of the Oyo-Ile people is eclipsed by later political developments. As a result, Ilorin is widely misrepresented as a Fulani city rather than as a conquered Yoruba town whose political institutions were restructured in the nineteenth century (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980; O'Hear, 1983).

The Old Oyo Empire was the most powerful pre-colonial Yoruba polity from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Founded by Oranyan, a descendant of Oduduwa, Oyo developed a sophisticated political system that balanced royal authority with aristocratic and military power (Law, 1977; Ajayi & Akintoye, 1980). The empire's territorial reach extended from modern-day southwestern Nigeria into parts of the Benin Republic and the Niger basin. Ilorin functioned within this system as a frontier military settlement and trading outpost designed to protect Oyo's northern borders and facilitate commerce across the savannah-forest belt (Awe, 1973; O'Hear, 1983). The name Ilorin itself is derived from a Yoruba term referring to the sharpening of iron tools, reflecting its origins as a Yoruba settlement built around hunting, warfare, and craftsmanship.

The collapse of the Old Oyo Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was one of the most transformative events in Yoruba history. Scholars have attributed this decline to internal political struggles, economic disruption, and external military pressures (Ajayi & Akintoye, 1980; Law, 1977). Within this broader imperial crisis, Ilorin

became the focal point of a dramatic realignment of power. Afonja, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo (generalissimo) of Oyo, rebelled against the Alafin and sought to transform Ilorin into an independent polity. To accomplish this, he invited Alimi, a Fulani Islamic cleric, and his followers to assist him militarily and spiritually (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980; O'Hear, 1983). This alliance, however, produced consequences far beyond Afonja's original intentions.

Following the defeat of Oyo authority in Ilorin, Afonja was eventually killed by the very Fulani allies he had invited. Alimi's descendants established the Ilorin Emirate, bringing the town under the influence of the Sokoto Caliphate and instituting a new Islamic political order (Abdulwahab, 2007; O'Hear, 1983). This shift did not involve the displacement of the indigenous Yoruba population; rather, it represented a political conquest that subordinated Yoruba elites and institutions under Fulani rule. Over time, the emirate system, reinforced by British colonial indirect rule, entrenched the perception of Ilorin as a Fulani city, thereby marginalizing the historical claims of the Oyo-Ile people.

The consequences of this transformation extend far beyond local politics. In Nigeria's highly plural and ethnically sensitive environment, control over historical narratives is a powerful instrument of legitimacy. As Nnoli (1980) has argued, ethnicity in Nigeria is not merely cultural but deeply political, shaping access to power, resources, and recognition. In Ilorin, the erasure of Yoruba foundational history has contributed to the political and symbolic subordination of Oyo-Ile descendants, even though they remain a significant demographic and cultural presence. This situation exemplifies how conquest, when combined with historiographical silence, can become institutionalized as historical "truth."

At the same time, the Oyo-Ile people did not simply disappear following their loss of political power. Instead, many migrated to other parts of Yorubaland, the Niger Delta, Lagos, and beyond, forming a dispersed yet interconnected diaspora (Brubaker, 2005). Diaspora, as a concept, refers not merely to physical dispersal but to the maintenance of collective memory, identity, and attachment to a homeland (Akumar, 2022). The Oyo-Ile diaspora has played important roles in education, commerce, religious life, and national politics, contributing significantly to Nigeria's development despite their marginalization in Ilorin itself.

This study therefore situates Ilorin within the broader historical processes of migration, conquest, identity formation, and national development. Drawing on functionalist, conflict, migration, and national development theories (Durkheim, 1938; Marx, 1867; Omoregbe, 1990), it argues that Ilorin represents a classic frontier society in which multiple ethnic groups were forced into a shared political space under unequal conditions. While functionalism helps explain how such a heterogeneous society continues to function, conflict theory reveals how power inequalities emerged and were maintained. Migration theory clarifies how the Oyo-Ile diaspora sustained Ilorin's Yoruba heritage beyond the town itself, while national development theory highlights the role of human agency in transforming both host and homeland societies.

By reconstructing Ilorin's history from the perspective of the Old Oyo-Ile diaspora, this paper seeks to challenge dominant narratives and restore historical balance. It argues that Ilorin was neither founded nor culturally defined by the Fulani; it was conquered and politically restructured, but its Yoruba foundations endured. Recognizing this reality is essential not only for historical accuracy but also for justice, inclusion, and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria's plural society.

Historical Background

The historical roots of Ilorin are inseparable from the rise and expansion of the Old Oyo Empire, one of the most powerful and sophisticated pre-colonial states in West Africa. Founded around the thirteenth century by Oranyan, a descendant of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba people, Oyo evolved from a small kingdom into a vast empire that dominated large portions of present-day southwestern and north-central Nigeria as well as parts of the Benin Republic (Law, 1977; Ajayi & Akintoye, 1980). By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Old Oyo had established itself as a major military and commercial power, controlling trans-regional trade routes and exerting political influence over numerous

vassal states.

The political system of Old Oyo was uniquely complex. Authority was shared between the Alafin (king), the Oyomesi (a council of chiefs), and the Are-Ona-Kakanfo (the supreme military commander), creating a system of checks and balances that limited autocracy (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980). This arrangement allowed the empire to maintain stability while pursuing territorial expansion. It was within this framework that Ilorin emerged as a strategic military outpost on the empire's northern frontier. Positioned along key trade and communication routes between the forest and savannah zones, Ilorin served as a buffer against external threats and as a hub for commercial and military activity (Awe, 1973; O'Hear, 1983).

Ilorin was founded and governed by Yoruba lineages long before the arrival of Fulani elements. The town's earliest rulers were descendants of Laderin, followed by Alugin, Pasin, and later Afonja, all of whom belonged to the Yoruba political tradition (Abdulwahab, 2007; O'Hear, 1983). The name "Ilorin," derived from the Yoruba phrase referring to the sharpening of iron tools, reflects its origin as a settlement built around Yoruba hunting, warfare, and craftsmanship. Oral traditions and archaeological evidence further support the Yoruba character of Ilorin's early settlement patterns and institutions.

By the late eighteenth century, however, the Old Oyo Empire was in decline. A combination of internal political rivalry, economic instability, and external pressures weakened central authority (Ajayi & Akintoye, 1980; Law, 1977). The Alafin's authority was increasingly contested by powerful military commanders, especially the Are-Ona-Kakanfo. It was within this volatile context that Afonja, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo based in Ilorin, challenged the authority of the Alafin, Aole. Seeking to free Ilorin from Oyo control and establish an independent political base, Afonja mobilized both local Yoruba forces and foreign allies (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980).

Afonja's alliance with Alimi, a Fulani Islamic cleric, marked a decisive turning point in Ilorin's history. Initially invited to provide spiritual and military support, Alimi and his followers soon became an independent power bloc within Ilorin (O'Hear, 1983; Abdulwahab, 2007). While Afonja succeeded in breaking away from Old Oyo, he lost control of the political process he had initiated. Following his death, the Fulani established the Ilorin Emirate, linking the town to the Sokoto Caliphate and replacing Yoruba political authority with Islamic emirate rule.

Nevertheless, this transformation did not erase Ilorin's Yoruba foundations. The indigenous population remained largely Yoruba, and Yoruba language, customs, and social institutions continued to shape everyday life (O'Hear, 1983). Ilorin thus became a frontier society—a space where conquest, migration, and cultural continuity coexisted, producing a complex and contested identity that persists into the modern era.

Afonja, Alimi and Political Transformation

The political transformation of Ilorin in the early nineteenth century was shaped decisively by the alliance—and eventual rupture—between Afonja, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo of the Old Oyo Empire, and Alimi, a Fulani Islamic cleric. Afonja was stationed in Ilorin as part of Oyo's constitutional arrangement, which prevented the Kakanfo from residing near the Alafin in order to forestall military coups (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980). However, as the authority of the Alafin weakened during the empire's decline, Afonja emerged as a powerful political actor with ambitions of autonomy.

Seeking to sever Ilorin from Old Oyo control, Afonja mobilized local Yoruba forces and invited Alimi and his Fulani followers to provide religious legitimacy and military support (O'Hear, 1983). This alliance initially proved successful. The authority of the Alafin was challenged, and Ilorin effectively became an independent political entity. However, Afonja underestimated the long-term objectives of his Fulani allies, who were themselves part of the broader wave of Islamic reform and political expansion associated with the Sokoto Jihad (Abdulwahab, 2007).

Following Afonja's death in a conflict involving Fulani forces, power in Ilorin shifted

decisively. Alimi's son, Abdulsalami, emerged as the first Emir of Ilorin, and the town was incorporated into the political and religious orbit of the Sokoto Caliphate (O'Hear, 1983). This marked the end of Yoruba political sovereignty in Ilorin and the beginning of emirate rule. Yet this transformation did not involve the displacement of the indigenous Yoruba population; rather, it represented a reconfiguration of political authority through conquest and religious legitimization.

The Afonja–Alimi episode thus illustrates how alliances formed under conditions of imperial collapse can produce unintended consequences. What began as a Yoruba struggle for autonomy culminated in the establishment of a new political order that subordinated the very people who initiated the revolt, embedding Ilorin within a Fulani-dominated political structure that persists in modified form to this day.

The Oyo-Ile Diaspora

The political subjugation of Ilorin's Yoruba elite following the rise of the Fulani emirate did not mark the disappearance of the Oyo-Ile people; rather, it initiated a process of dispersion that gave rise to a dynamic and influential diaspora. Diaspora, as a historical and sociological concept, refers not merely to physical migration but to the sustained attachment of a people to their homeland through memory, identity, and social networks (Brubaker, 2005; Akumar, 2022). The Oyo-Ile diaspora fits this definition, as descendants of Ilorin's original Yoruba settlers relocated to other parts of Yorubaland, the Niger Delta, Lagos, and beyond while retaining strong cultural and genealogical ties to Ilorin.

This dispersal was driven by multiple factors, including political marginalization under emirate rule, limited access to power, and the search for economic and educational opportunities (O'Hear, 1983; Abdulwahab, 2007). As Oyo-Ile elites lost influence within Ilorin's political system, many sought alternative spaces where their skills and status could be recognized. Over time, these migrants became prominent in commerce, public service, education, and religious institutions across Nigeria, contributing significantly to national development.

Despite geographical dispersion, Oyo-Ile identity remained resilient. Language, kinship networks, traditional titles, and cultural practices served as mechanisms for preserving collective memory and sustaining a sense of belonging to Ilorin as a homeland. This continuity reflects what scholars describe as "diasporic consciousness," in which dispersed populations maintain emotional and symbolic ties to their place of origin even when physically distant (Brubaker, 2005). Through remittances, visits, and participation in hometown associations, the Oyo-Ile diaspora continues to influence social and economic life in Ilorin.

The political re-emergence of Oyo-Ile descendants in Kwara State politics, most notably the election of Mohammed Lawal, a descendant of Afonja, as civilian governor in 2003, further demonstrates the enduring significance of this diaspora (Abdulwahab, 2007). The Oyo-Ile diaspora thus represents not a vanished people but a dispersed yet enduring community whose historical roots and contemporary contributions remain central to Ilorin's identity and Nigeria's development.

II. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multidisciplinary theoretical framework combining functionalism, conflict theory, migration theory, and national development theory in order to explain the historical transformation of Ilorin and the experience of the Oyo-Ile diaspora. The integration of these perspectives enables a holistic understanding of how political power, social organization, population movement, and human development interact in plural societies.

Functionalism, associated primarily with Émile Durkheim, views society as a system of interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability and order (Durkheim, 1938). From this perspective, Ilorin can be understood as a complex social system composed of multiple ethnic groups—Yoruba, Fulani, Nupe, and Baruba—whose interactions have produced a relatively stable, though unequal, social order. Despite political domination by

the Fulani emirate, Ilorin has not disintegrated into persistent violent conflict, suggesting the presence of integrative mechanisms such as shared economic life, religious coexistence, and interethnic interaction. Functionalism therefore helps explain how Ilorin has continued to function as a cosmopolitan city despite historical grievances and political asymmetry.

However, functionalism alone cannot account for inequality and domination. For this reason, conflict theory is also employed. Rooted in the work of Karl Marx, conflict theory emphasizes that social order is maintained through power, coercion, and control of resources rather than consensus (Marx, 1867). In Ilorin, the overthrow of Afonja and the establishment of the emirate represent a classic case of political conquest, in which one group gained control over political institutions and redefined legitimacy through religion and external alliances. The persistent marginalization of Oyo-Ile elites reflects the structural entrenchment of this power imbalance. Conflict theory thus reveals how historical conquest continues to shape contemporary identity, governance, and access to power in Ilorin.

Migration theory provides a third analytical lens. Human societies are inherently mobile, and migration is often triggered by political instability, economic opportunity, or social exclusion (Castles & Miller, 2009). The dispersal of the Oyo-Ile people following the loss of political power in Ilorin reflects this pattern. Rather than passive victims, Oyo-Ile migrants actively reconstructed their lives across Nigeria while maintaining ties to their homeland. This diasporic movement allowed them to accumulate resources, education, and political influence that later became instruments for re-engagement with Ilorin and Kwara State.

Finally, national development theory anchors this study in a broader normative framework. Omoregbe (1990) argues that development is fundamentally about the growth of human capacity and moral agency rather than merely economic expansion. The contributions of the Oyo-Ile diaspora—in governance, education, commerce, and social leadership—illustrate how marginalized groups can nonetheless play crucial roles in national development. Their experience demonstrates that inclusive recognition of diverse historical communities is essential for building a just and cohesive nation.

Together, these four theoretical perspectives provide a robust framework for understanding Ilorin as a contested historical space shaped by conquest, adaptation, migration, and human agency. They reveal that Ilorin's present identity is not the product of cultural replacement but of layered historical processes that continue to influence power, memory, and belonging.

III. Discussion

The historical evolution of Ilorin reveals a pattern that is both distinctive and emblematic of broader African frontier societies shaped by conquest, migration, and political realignment. The evidence examined in this study confirms that Ilorin was originally founded and governed by Yoruba peoples of Oyo-Ile descent, long before the arrival of Fulani clerics and soldiers in the early nineteenth century (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980; O'Hear, 1983). The transformation of Ilorin into a Fulani emirate did not involve the demographic replacement of the Yoruba population but rather the political subordination of an indigenous society through military and religious legitimation. This distinction is critical, because political dominance, when left unchallenged by historical scholarship, often becomes mistaken for historical ownership.

From the standpoint of conflict theory, Ilorin represents a textbook case of elite displacement and institutional capture (Marx, 1867). Afonja's alliance with Alimi was forged within the crisis of the Old Oyo Empire, but it produced a political order that benefited the Fulani rather than the Yoruba initiators of the revolt. Once Alimi's descendants gained control of Ilorin's military and religious institutions, they monopolized political authority and embedded their dominance through the emirate system. This structural imbalance persisted into the colonial period when British indirect rule reinforced emirate authority as a mechanism of governance (O'Hear, 1983). Consequently, political inequality became institutionalized, making it appear natural and permanent.

Yet Ilorin did not collapse into perpetual ethnic conflict. Functionalist theory helps

explain this paradox (Durkheim, 1938). Despite political domination, Yoruba, Fulani, Nupe, and Baruba communities continued to interact economically, socially, and culturally. Markets, religious institutions, and kinship networks created interdependencies that sustained social order. Yoruba language and customs remained widespread, while Islam became a shared religious framework for many groups. These integrative mechanisms allowed Ilorin to function as a cosmopolitan city even as political power remained unevenly distributed.

The Oyo-Ile diaspora further complicates this picture. Migration theory suggests that groups displaced from power often seek new opportunities elsewhere, not as a sign of weakness but as a strategy of adaptation (Castles & Miller, 2009). The dispersal of Oyo-Ile descendants across Nigeria enabled them to access education, commerce, and political platforms that were limited within Ilorin's emirate structure. Over time, this diaspora accumulated social and economic capital that allowed it to continue shaping Ilorin indirectly through remittances, cultural institutions, and political engagement. The election of Mohammed Lawal, an Afonja descendant, as Kwara State governor in 2003 symbolized this long-term reassertion of Yoruba agency within Ilorin's political landscape (Abdulwahab, 2007).

The persistence of the belief that Ilorin is a "Fulani city" reflects not historical fact but what historians describe as hegemonic memory—the version of the past promoted by dominant groups (Carr, 1961). Because Fulani elites controlled political institutions and Islamic scholarship in Ilorin, their narrative became dominant, while Yoruba foundational history faded from public consciousness. This erasure illustrates how power determines not only governance but also the production of history itself.

From a national development perspective, this marginalization is deeply problematic. Omoregbe (1990) argues that true development depends on the recognition and empowerment of human communities. When the historical contributions of a people are denied, their sense of belonging and citizenship is weakened. In Ilorin, the continued sidelining of Oyo-Ile history has implications for political inclusion, cultural identity, and interethnic relations. Recognizing Yoruba origins does not threaten Fulani presence; rather, it creates a more truthful and inclusive narrative that can foster social cohesion.

Ultimately, Ilorin should be understood neither as a Fulani city nor solely as a Yoruba town, but as a frontier society shaped by layered histories of settlement, conquest, and adaptation. The Oyo-Ile people were its founders; the Fulani established political dominance; and both groups contributed to its development. Any attempt to privilege one narrative at the expense of the other distorts history and undermines the possibility of equitable coexistence.

IV. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Ilorin's historical identity cannot be reduced to its present political structure. Although Ilorin is today governed within the framework of a Fulani emirate system, its origins, settlement patterns, and early political institutions were unmistakably Yoruba, rooted in the Old Oyo imperial tradition. The rise of Fulani political dominance in Ilorin was not the result of demographic replacement but of conquest and strategic alliance, most notably through the Afonja–Alimi episode that transformed Ilorin's political order in the nineteenth century (Akinjogbin & Ayandele, 1980; O'Hear, 1983).

By tracing the trajectory of the Oyo-Ile diaspora, this study has shown that political subjugation did not translate into cultural extinction. Rather, the dispersal of Oyo-Ile descendants created a dynamic network of communities that contributed significantly to Nigeria's economic, educational, and political development. Their continued engagement with Ilorin—through cultural preservation, kinship ties, and political participation—demonstrates that diaspora is not a rupture from history but a reconfiguration of it (Brubaker, 2005).

The persistence of the belief that Ilorin is a Fulani-founded city reflects the power of hegemonic narratives rather than historical reality. When political authority becomes equated with historical ownership, indigenous histories are easily erased. Such erasure has

implications not only for scholarship but for governance and social justice in Nigeria's plural society. Recognizing Ilorin's Yoruba foundations does not negate Fulani contributions; instead, it restores balance and accuracy to a shared history.

Ultimately, Ilorin should be understood as a frontier society forged through migration, conflict, and accommodation. Its past is layered, not singular. By restoring the Oyo-Ile story to the center of Ilorin's history, this study contributes to a more inclusive and truthful understanding of Nigerian identity and offers a framework for managing diversity in post-colonial states.

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