

# **Traditional Histories and Historical Reconstruction of the Origin and Early History of Ilorin: A Reexamination**

**Ismail Otukoko Salihu\***

**Abstract:** Since the 1950s when African and Africanist historians began to use oral evidence as a veritable source for historical reconstruction of Africa's pre-colonial past, traditional histories have continued to occupy a central stage in modern African historiography. In spite of its limitations, no serious historical inquiry into the past of Africa's non-literate societies would ignore traditional material. The use of traditional accounts of the origin and early history of Ilorin has continued to pose serious challenges to historians and non-historians. Some reasons may be responsible for this including Ilorin's multiethnic and multicultural configuration; inexhaustive analysis and interpretation of various versions of Ilorin's traditional history in existing attempts at reconstructing its origin and early history, and the fact that much of Ilorin's history up to the 1820s has not been reconsidered in the light of historical and archaeological evidence from various parts of the Old Oyo Empire and the entire region within which context the origin and early history of Ilorin is located. This paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach to reexamine the traditional accounts on the "origin" and "early" history of Ilorin and posits that various elements in the traditions suggest different phases in the historical evolution of Ilorin and of the developments before the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Etymology; Ilorin; Iron; Legends; Traditions

---

\* Ismail Otukoko Salihu, Department of Religions, History and Heritage Studies, College of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria. Email: salisma2004@yahoo.co.uk.

## Introduction

Various scholars and writers have commented on the challenging and controversial nature of the traditional materials on the origin and early history of Ilorin. Generally, while some scholars see the diversity and controversial nature of the legends of origin of Ilorin as well as their conflicting interpretations as features that are not peculiar to Ilorin, others have suggested that the problematic nature of Ilorin's traditional history could, to some extent, be traced to the diverse origins of Ilorin's early settlers. Thus, Jimba (1981) , on a general note, observes that:

the origin of Ilorin as a collective settlement or a single town is shrouded in a deep and as yet an insolvable uncertainty when viewed from a historical perspective. For in Ilorin today, there are historical conjectures, claims and counter-claims which are still controversial and inconclusive as to the origin and foundation of the ancient city.

However, while Lloyd (40–47) is of the view that in spite of Ilorin's "considerable cultural homogeneity", the legends of its early history vary widely with the origins of the teller. Omoiya (20–35) considers Ilorin's location on a frontier zone and its multicultural configuration as sources of controversies and challenges in locating its origin. Thus, explaining or accounting for the origin of Ilorin and other aspects of its early history has continued to attract scholarly attention and to produce various interpretations. This paper reexamines the various traditional accounts on Ilorin and extant explanations of such traditions.

Ilorin is located within a region which is now in the north-central geo-political zone of modern Nigeria. The city is situated on latitude 8° 24' North and 8° 36' North and longitude 4° 10' East and 4° 36' East. The settlement presently occupies an area of about 100km<sup>2</sup> while its geological features include the Precambrian basement complex rock, loamy soil with sodium and low fertility and lateritic soil constituting the major soil types due to the leaching of minerals nutrients of the soil' (Ajadi et al. 26). The land is largely undulating; the elevation in the western part ranges from 273m to 333m above sea level and from 273m to 364m in the eastern part. The highest point is the Sobi hill with an elevation of 394m above sea level (Oyegun 3–5; Balogun 7–25; Ajadi et al. 24–30). The major river is the Asa River; other smaller streams include Aluko, Odo-Okun, Amule, Alalubosa and Foma. Ilorin is blessed with abundant reserves of clay, which is a major raw material

for the local pottery making industry, for which Ilorin has remained renowned.

### **The Origin of Ilorin: The Traditions and Their Explanations**

Ilorin has no claims of autochthonous population in its traditions of origin. However, the region in which it is located is said to have evidence of such population in earlier times (Usman 11). Although scholars of Ilorin history are not agreed on various aspects of the origin and early history of the city, it is a well-established fact that the founder(s) and early settler(s) of Ilorin, like other settlements that are now big towns and cities, were initially seasonal visitors some of whom eventually became permanent residents. Therefore, central to the traditional accounts on the origin/founding of Ilorin are such themes as the migration, arrival and settlement of different personalities and, possibly, different groups of people. However, since oral traditions are often concerned with important personalities, available traditional materials are always about the migration/arrival of individuals rather than groups.

Based on the “tradition of migration”, derivable from the traditions, various individuals have been identified as the “founders” of, or “earliest” settlers in, Ilorin. These included a Baruba, Ojo Isekuse, Asaju, Laderin, Eyinla, and Afonja. Thus, in spite of the disagreement over the actual identity of the founder(s), the only explanation of origin acceptable to scholars is that the founding of Ilorin was a product of the migration of the earliest among these personalities who found the Ilorin area suitable for their activities and settlement.

Until very recently, there are five traditional explanations of the founding and naming of the settlement. These explanations can be subsumed into three major traditions, namely the “*Ilu Erin*”, “*Ilu Irin*” and the “*Ilọ Irin*” traditions. These traditions are related to the geographical or ecological features of Ilorin and the occupational activities of its “earliest” settlers. Each of them has had its proponents/ supporters and opponents among scholars of Ilorin history but none have become generally accepted.

The tradition of *Ilu Erin* posits that “Ilorin” was derived from a corruption of “*Ilu Erin*” meaning “the land/forest of elephants” and that the settlement was founded by Yoruba hunter(s) who engaged in hunting wild animals like elephants. These hunter-founder(s) have been variously identified as Ojo Isekuse, Asaju, Eyinla/Ayinla and Laderin. However, the most popular figures among them were Ojo and Eyinla.

Ikokoro (Introduction; Chapter I), the first local chronicler of Ilorin, maintains that the *Ilu Erin* tradition was the “soundest among the traditions handed down” because Eyinla, the founder of Ilorin, was a renowned elephant hunter. This tradition linking the name “Ilorin” with *Ilu Erin* was reported by various colonial officers such as E. C. Duff, P. M. Dwyer and G. J. Lethem (NAK ILORPROF 4 1900/1912; Duff and Dwyer 443–453). The latter, also writing in 1912, identified the founder as *Engla*, which is apparently the same as Ikokoro’s Eyinla.

A major proponent of the tradition of *Ilu Erin* among scholars of Ilorin history is Omoiya who, however, rejects the emphasis on an individual as Ilorin’s founder. Omoiya argues that such explanations of “individual-founding” of Ilorin linked to the tradition are “lacking in facts sufficient enough to lead to scholarly acceptance.” He posits that the tradition “may be said to have some credence” if explained as a “theory of group founding.” Omoiya suggests that the founding of Ilorin should be explained as a product of “group action” (i.e. “through the activities of group(s) of people” rather than those of an individual). Omoiya (“Challenges for Scholars” 20–35; *The Origin* 62; “The Balogun Institution” 21) further argues that “the fact that an elephant was found around Ilorin less than five decades ago and there is an area called *Oko Erin* (settlement of elephants); one is tempted to be convinced that Ilorin was coined from *Oko Erin*.” Based on this conviction, Omoiya (*The Origin* 62; “Challenges for Scholars” 20–35) concludes, among others, that Ilorin, as *Ilu Erin* or as “a games field for hunters”, was founded by Yoruba hunters and that it existed as “scattered settlements for a long time” during which the settlers were not aware of their existence.

Jimoh (26), however, refutes the *Ilu Erin* tradition and describes it as “another mythological explanation.” He argues that “the killing of, probably a strayed, elephant on the outskirts of Ilorin in 1824 is no longer sufficient to justify the presumption that Ilorin is a corruption of *Ilu Erin*.” Similarly, Saliu and Jawondo (1–20) posit that *Ilu Erin* “could not have attracted popular usage” to have become corrupted into Ilorin because of obvious indications that “not many hunters hunted for elephants at Ilorin” and that by implication there were no large number of elephants in the area. The authors therefore refute the *Ilu Erin* tradition on the ground that “the killing of an elephant happened long after the establishment of the town and the emirate system.” Their argument seems to be connected to the periods indicated in some accounts for the “killing of an elephant” used to corroborate

the *Ilu Erin* tradition, such as the reign of the first Emir, Abdul Salami (r. c.1823–c.1836).

Unlike the tradition of *Ilu Erin*, the *Ilu Irin* tradition suggests that Ilorin was “a land of iron”; that it was activities connected with iron deposit such as “iron melting [sic]” that attracted people to the area and that the name “Ilorin” was derived from the corruption of *Ilu irin* (Omoiya, *The Origin* 60). Those who subscribe to, or merely report, this tradition, cite Ikokoro’s *Ta’lif* (Balogun 17; Smith 42–71). In his “A Little New Light on the Collapse of the Alafinate of Yoruba”, Smith (67) presents a translation of extract of *Ta’lif* in which the portion relevant to the discussion here goes thus:

It is also said that it was named Ilorin because of *the prospecting for iron which goes on there, ilu irin in Yoruba*. It is said that a certain man was searching for iron and did not find it. But he continued searching for it and so the place where he searched was called Ilorin, and thus was this country named.

Omoiya (*The Origin*, 60–61), who considers the *Ilu Irin* tradition in recent times, rejects it noting that it “could not be held with seriousness” because there have been neither traces nor archaeological evidence of iron deposit in or around Ilorin. However, a careful study of translations of the *Ta’lif* indicates that the *Ilu Irin* tradition was probably derived from a misrepresentation in an earlier translation of Ikokoro’s *Ta’lif*. This will be considered shortly.

The third major tradition, the *Ilọ Irin* tradition, has two main versions: one, the very common and dominant; and the other, being not so common, neglected. A third version, which can be derived from the *Ta’lif*, has not been given any consideration due to an apparent misinterpretation of Ikokoro’s account. The most dominant traditional explanation is that Ilorin was derived from two words, *Ilọ* and *Irin*. As often used in extant Ilorin history, *Ilọ* means both “an object [used] for”, and “the act of”, sharpening while *irin* means “iron”. Therefore, *Ilọ-irin* is explained to mean (i) “the object for” and/or “the act of sharpening” [*Ilọ*] iron [*irin*]. Both explanations are usually connected with the sharpening of iron implements by Ojo, one of the legendary founders of Ilorin. The main evidence often provided by proponents of this postulation is the legendary “rock” named “Okuta Ilorin”, now situated at Ile Bamidele in Idi-

Ape quarters of Ilorin (Jimba, *Iwe Itan Ilorin*; Onikoko 1; Jimoh, *Ilorin* 18, 25–26; Hermon-Hodge 63; Sulu).

Jimoh (*Ilorin* 25–26), who argues in support of the tradition, explains that the “rock” was located near the hut of a Baruba hermit, the earliest, pre-Yoruba settler in Ilorin and that “being a good metal sharpener [it] was called *Ilọ irin*, meaning “iron sharpener”, by the Yoruba.” Jimoh also submits that “Ilorin” was derived from “ilo-irin” just as Osogbo was abbreviated from “Osho-Igbo”. In support of this tradition, Jimba (*Iwe Itan Ilorin*, 1) suggests a possible process of the evolution of “Ilorin” from *Ilọ-irin*, the object for sharpening iron, through “*A nlọ si ibiti wọn ti nlọ irin*” or “*a nlọ si ibii Ilorin*”, i.e. “we are going to the place where iron is sharpened”, finally to “Ilorin”.

Refuting the *Ilọ-irin* tradition, Omoiya (*The Origin* 60, 61; “Challenges for Scholars” 20–35) contends that “apart from its use by hunters *before the founding of Ilorin*”, the “igneous rock” used by the hunters to sharpen their hunting implements was not uniquely different from other rocks. Saliu and Jawondo (1–20) neither accept nor reject this tradition categorically but provide another alternative, albeit linguistic, explanation. To them, since Ojo, who is associated with the founding of Ilorin in the tradition, met the Baruba in Ilorin, “the word *Ilọ-Irin* might be a derivation from *Ironi*, a Baruba word meaning alligator pepper, an indispensable item among the Baruba warriors and charm makers”. The authors, therefore, see the word “*Ilorin*” to be a corruption of the Baruba’s “*Ironi*.”

Danmole (“The Ta’lif” 57–67) observes that the two dominant versions of the traditions have elements present in Ilorin (i.e. Ile Bandele and Oko Erin). He suggests that the hunting of elephants and other wild animals would have predated the “actual founding of the town” and that the presence of such “large wild animals would have made it necessary for hunters to produce well-sharpened implements for hunting expeditions.” Danmole submits that “the possibility of deriving the name [Ilorin] from the “sharpening of iron” is more plausible” although not necessarily from the use of Okuta Ilorin, for “[t]he presence of the Sobi Hills and other rock stones in the immediate area provided suitable grounds for hunters to sharpen their hunting implements.”

The second, often neglected version of the tradition of *Ilọ-Irin* is that “propounded” or reported by Samuel Johnson, which is significantly different from all Ilorin traditional explanations in three major ways. First, the etymology of “Ilorin” and, secondly, the main “evidence”

provided for its derivation in Johnson's account are markedly different from those in Ilorin sources. Thirdly, Johnson's postulation combines elements of the traditions of *Ilu irin* and *Ilọ irin*, which have not been given consideration. According to Johnson, "[c]ertain districts are rich in iron ores, its iron production gave its name to the city of Ilorin, from ilo irin, iron grinding" (Johnson 119–120).

Johnson's account, therefore, posits that Ilorin was rich in iron-ore deposits (i.e. it was an "*Ilu irin*" or "land of iron") and that it was renowned as an iron-working centre where one or more of the major processes of iron production, namely "iron grinding" (i.e. "*ilọ irin*"), was practised. The main thesis of this paper, therefore, is that the name "Ilorin" was derived from the corruption of *Ilọ-irin* but the activity implied in the origin of the two words had more to do with "iron grinding" in connection with iron metallurgy, as implied in Johnson's narration, than with "iron sharpening" in connection with hunting as commonly explained in Ilorin sources.

The third version of *Ilọ Irin*, which connects its derivation with the "prospecting for iron", as attributed to Ikokoro's, is markedly different from Johnson's. It appears to have emanated from a speculative attempt by Ikokoro's informant(s) to give a linguistic explanation for "Ilorin". Linguistically, as Crowther (147) explains, *Ilọ* is a Yoruba word, which means a "public inquiry after a thing." Therefore, as Ikokoro reports, *Ilọ* is used in this version to refer to the "act of searching" or "making inquiry" for/over a "lost iron tool." Hence, "Ilorin" is said to have been given to the place where a certain man repeatedly searched for his lost iron tool. Thus, in another translation of the *Ta 'lif*, the following account is given:

It is also claimed that it is called Ilorin because of a search (made there) for an iron implement. The equivalent of that in Yoruba is *Ilo Irin*; *it is said that a man lost an iron tool. Although he kept on searching for it, he failed to find it, but for this reason it is called "the place where he searched for it", and so this town came to have that name.*

From a careful reading of the Arabic text of *Ta 'lif* and the translations/ explanations given by experts in Arabic/Ajami, the above account seems to be an appropriate translation of Ikokoro's Arabic text. However, Ikokoro uses "*lilọ irin*" as "the equivalent of the search for iron tool" rather than *ilu irin* or *ilọ irin* as given in one of the translations. It is,

therefore, obvious that the “search” was for a lost “iron tool”, which is different from the “prospecting for iron”, a part of the processes of iron production. The apparent implausibility of this grammatical explanation probably explains why Ikokoro does not subscribe to the tradition of *Lilọ Irin* (“searching for a lost iron tool”) and why he considers the *Ilu Erin* tradition, the only alternative available to him then as the “most sound of the traditions handed down.”

### **The Emergence of the Various Traditions of Origin of Ilorin**

It is presently difficult to date, with any degree of certainty, the emergence of the different versions of the legends of Ilorin origin. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the settlement was variously referred to in some contemporary accounts although until probably late in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, no serious attention was paid to such questions as the etymology of “Ilorin”, the founder(s) and circumstances surrounding its founding. The earliest reference to “Ilorin” in written works during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in the accounts written by Clapperton and Richard Lander who visited Yorubaland in the 1820s. Although these European explorers did not visit Ilorin, they got pieces of information from Oyo-Ile and apparently from other people they interacted with. Writing about their journey through Yorubaland in 1826, Clapperton and Richard make mention of “a large” and “considerable town” called “*Lori*” “possessed” or “built” by the Alaafin’s “Hausa slaves” who had “fled into the woods” and had been joined by the Fellatahs, that is, the Fulani (Clapperton 28).

In the account of their own visit to Old Oyo in 1830, R. Lander and J. Lander (189–190) wrote of “a town of prodigious size [*which*] *has lately sprung into being*”, was “first resorted to by a party of Falatah who named it *Alorie* and [who] encouraged all the slaves in the country” to join them in the town “as far back as forty years.” Both “*Lori*” and “*Alorie*” are known to be references to Ilorin although while the former was probably used by the Hausa, the Fulani used the latter name. Clapperton and Richard indicate that the “new town” was built by Hausa slaves in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; the Landers suggest that it was “recently built” and first “settled” by the Fulani in the late 18<sup>th</sup>c. In both accounts, there are no suggestions as to the meaning of the name “*Alorie*” or “*Lori*” or legends of its origin. Bowen (188), who visited Ilorin in the 1850s, suggests that “*Alori*” is the Arabic form of “*Ilorin*”.

As the above earliest written accounts indicate, the reference to “a town recently” built by the Hausa/Fulani is not to the ancient Ilorin.



Rather, it obviously refers to the “*Islamic Ilorin*” (the emirate), although the period indicated in the narration “covers” the period of transformation from “*Ilorin Afonja*”, “built” from late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with considerable help from Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri elements, to “*Ilorin Garin-Alimi*.” Thus, the two earliest written names by which Ilorin was first documented, “*Lorí*” and “*Alorie*”, were probably derived from non-Yoruba informants of the European explorers.

As respective pioneers in local historiography, Johnson’s and Ikokoro’s versions of the legends of Ilorin origin were most likely the earliest recorded of such attempts to interrogate the etymology of Ilorin, its founder and circumstances of its founding. Their individual efforts produced three different legends, two of which were reported by Ikokoro. As indicated in the two accounts, Ikokoro’s reports seem to have resulted from deliberate “searching” for answers to the subjects as he presented his findings directly in connection with the founding of Ilorin. Johnson’s version, however, is presented quite accidentally while discussing “trades and professions” among the Yoruba, one of which, iron production, he says gave Ilorin its name. Thus, by 1897, when Johnson completed the first draft of his *History*, and 1912 when Ikokoro completed the compilation of his *Ta’lif*, two major traditions on the origin/founding of Ilorin (*ilo irin*, “iron grinding” and *ilu erin*, “land of elephants” respectively) were already in circulation. While Ikokoro dismisses the plausibility of the *Ilu Erin* tradition, Johnson presents the *Ilo-Irin* (“iron grinding”) version as the explanation for the etymology of “Ilorin”.

Furthermore, unlike Johnson who knows no other traditions of origin than the “iron grinding” version, and no founder(s) of Ilorin than Laderin, Ikokoro knows at least two versions of the legends (*Lilọ/Ilo Irin* and *Ilu Erin*) although he knows nothing about Laderin’s “founding” of Ilorin. However, while the *ilu erin* version seems to have been common in Ilorin by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two versions of *Ilo irin* legend (iron sharpener/sharpening and iron grinding) would appear to start to gain attention by the third decade of the century. This was some years after the publication of Johnson’s *History of the Yorubas* in 1921. By 1929, both traditions were reported in Hermon-Hodge’s *Gazetteer of Ilorin Province* though it would probably be the first time the “iron sharpening” tradition was first documented.

By the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, Johnson’s account of Laderin’s founding of Ilorin had begun to be incorporated into the official

accounts of Ilorin history by colonial authorities. Hence, whereas in 1912, one *Engla/Eyinla* was identified as the “first inhabitant” of Ilorin, in 1939, Ilorin, though described as “not historically a very old town”, was said to have been “founded by the grandfather of Afonja” (*cf.* NAK ILOPROF 900\1912, para. 17; NAK ILOPROF 3737/11, para. 2). However, whereas Ojo/Engla/Eyinla is named in connection with the Ilu Erin tradition, none of the traditions has been associated with Laderin’s “founding” of Ilorin.

### **Ilu Erin, Ilu Irin and Ilọ-Irin: A Reexamination of the Traditions**

Given the centrality of the *Okuta Ilorin* to the dominant local tradition and explanations of the etymology of Ilorin, it seems to be appropriate to start a critique of the traditions with the legendary stone. First, it seems that those who have subscribed to the dominant tradition of *Ilọ irin* are not personally familiar with the *Okuta Ilorin* from which most agree (or disagree) that Ilorin derived its name. Geologically, the *Okuta Ilorin* is not an “igneous rock”; rather, it is a lateritic stone. Secondly, although such a lateritic stone might be “suitable” for “sharpening” iron tools/weapons, and also for grinding, the lateritic *Okuta Ilorin* has no physical traces that it was used for “sharpening iron” or that it was “a good metal sharpener” as often posited in existing explanations.

Thirdly, there is nothing peculiar about the *Okuta Ilorin* that would have made it the only “stone” that was suitable for “sharpening iron” by Ilorin’s early settlers. Such lateritic stones and outcrops are among the most common geological features of Ilorin up till the present times. Thus, Ilorin could not have been “a stoneless area” to have compelled the earliest settlers to rely on a single lateritic stone for sharpening their metal tools. In addition, there were and are still scattered in different parts of Ilorin countless igneous and granitic rocks and hollows that are more suitable for “sharpening” and “grinding” iron or iron tools.

As reported from various archaeological researches, rock hollows, such as now found in parts of Ilorin, are evidence of iron working activities in addition to various other purposes for which they were used including industrial (bead making), military (sharpening of war weapons) and domestic (i.e. grinding of food items) (Usman, “Ceramic Seriation” 149–169; Usman, 2012: 122; Aleru 37–50; Aleru, personal interview). With other archaeological evidence like iron ore deposits, iron quarries, smelting furnaces, tuyères, and metal pieces,

archaeologists have submitted that the entire region within which Ilorin is located has abundant evidence of iron working in the past (Usman, *The Yoruba Frontier* 58, 121–124; Aleru 37–50).

Indeed, just as the claim of the killing of an elephant during the reign of the first emir of Ilorin, Abdul-Salami (c.1823–c.1836), is considered inadequate to prove that Ilorin owed its name to *Ilu Erin*, the existence of *Oko Erin* within the vicinity of “Ilorin” suggests that Ilorin could not have been derived from a corruption of “Ilu Erin” as usually postulated. This argument parallels a similar situation at Ogbomoso where a certain quarter named “*Oke-Elerin*” was the area where *Aale*, a Nupe elephant hunter and one of the earliest settlers, had hunted elephants; its naming was quite distinct from, and unrelated to, the naming of the larger settlement, “Ogbomoso”, historically associated with a military feat by Soun Ogunlola, one of the earliest non-Yoruba settlers (Agiri 32–51).

It should also be emphasised that, linguistically, the concept/act of “grinding” (*ilọ* as in “*Ilọ-irin*”) is quite different from the particular concept/act of *pipon* (as in “*Ipọn-irin*”) or “sharpening”, which has dominated existing interpretations of “Ilorin”. However, “*Ipọnrin*” has also been translated as “iron smelting”, which suggests that “*pipon*” could also mean “smelting” (Akinjogbin 55–61). Thus, although both activities (*ilọ* and *ipon*) had to do with ironworking, the word “*irin*” (iron) in both does not suggest “iron weapons” or “tools” usually ascribed to it in various interpretations of the traditions of Ilorin’s origin. Of course, it is not likely that the Yoruba would have used the same word, *irin* (raw iron obtained from smelting of ores), for various metal products made from iron such as *ada* (cutlass), *ida* (sword), *ọbe* (knife), *aake* (axe-heads), and *Ọfa* (arrow-heads). Apart from Jimba (*Iwe Itan Ilorin*, 1) who names the iron weapon sharpened on the *Okuta Ilorin* as “*Ada*” (cutlass), other sources do not specifically name the particular iron weapon “sharpened” on the “rock” by Ojo and other Yoruba hunters. Therefore, *Ilọ-irin* (“iron grinding”) probably belonged to a period that is different from the era of Ojo Isekuse and Eminla.

The above submission may be corroborated from two points that have continuously been neglected in extant interpretations of the traditions of Ilorin’s origin. First is the possible availability of raw material(s) (iron ores/ironstones) for ironworking, which various observers and archaeologists have now confirmed were smelted in various parts of pre-colonial northern Yorubaland. Secondly, there is the obvious lack of reference to iron-smelting and smelters in extant accounts on those

identified as “founders” of Ilorin. The contention here is that such individuals as Ojo Isekuse and Eminla, whose activity (“sharpening of iron weapons” especially for hunting), is widely explained to have given birth to the name “Ilorin”, probably belonged to a later phase in the historical evolution of Ilorin. The first phase, as is being proposed here, was dominated by the availability of ironstones/ore, prospecting for, and production of iron by skillful indigenous iron smelters who became the “founders” or “early settlers” of an iron-bearing Ilorin (*Ilu Irin*). As perhaps the earliest phase of the historical origin and development of Ilorin, it might be appropriate to describe that stage as the “*Iron-Making Ilorin*”, that is, *Ilu Irin* and *Ilu Ilọ-Irin*.

Based on the above, the Ojos, the Eminlas and other Yoruba hunters would have belonged to a later period characterised by hunting of wild animals including elephants. If Onikoko’s contention that the history of Ilorin “dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century even before Ojo [Isekuse]” is correct, then “the iron-making phase” of Ilorin’s evolution would belong to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (i.e. 1500s) or earlier. From all indications, this period does not appear to be contemporaneous with or immediately followed by Ojo’s advent and era in Ilorin. There was, therefore, probably an interval of some period of time between the phase dominated by “iron-making” and that characterised by “iron-using” especially for hunting.

If Johnson’s account of the tradition of *Ilo irin* (“iron grinding”) is anything to go by, there is the indication that early Ilorin was one of those “*certain districts that were rich in iron ores*” and “*renowned for iron production.*” It, therefore, strongly suggests a connection between iron-working/making (through smelting and grinding) and the naming of Ilorin. In other words, since “*its iron production gave its name to the city of Ilorin*”, as Johnson reports, the entire region, or at least the nucleus of “ancient Ilorin”, must have been an important ancient centre of indigenous iron technology. It would, therefore, seem that its founding was either as an industrial complex for iron production or, like other similar settlements reported in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a small settlement inhabited by a few iron producers. When this development took place in “ancient”, prehistoric time is, however, a challenge for archaeologists to resolve.

Apart from the tradition of iron production reported by Johnson, there is also another iron production-related “tradition”, which corroborates a possible connection between iron technology and the origin of “Ilorin” either as a settlement or its eventual name. This tradition, derived from a

popular saying credited to the Oyo Yoruba, is reported to be very current in the 19<sup>th</sup>c. The saying, which Jimba (c13) includes among Ilorin's praise names/songs (*Oriki*), is also reported by Oyedepi (451–459) thus:

Ilorin,  
Ilu ti n lẹ irin  
Abòntásê eniyan

Meaning:

Ilorin,  
*The city that grinds iron to powdery dust*  
Not to talk of human beings.

This praise-song clearly agrees with Johnson in describing Ilorin as a place where people “ground iron to powdery dust” and strongly suggests, also, that Ilorin's earliest settlers/founders were skillful ironworkers rather than hunters. It also corroborates the contention of this paper that Ilorin traditions, which identifies Ojo Isekuse as a hunter rather than an ironworker, and further associate his “sharpening of iron weapons” (“*ilẹ irin*”) with the naming of the settlement, are not adequate to explain the circumstances surrounding the foundation of the settlement or the derivation of the name “Ilorin”.

It has been established that iron was smelted quite earlier in different parts of northern Yorubaland within which Ilorin is located and elsewhere in Africa where the raw materials for iron production are said to include laterite, magnetite and hematite (Aleru 37–50; Aleru; Usman, *The Yoruba Frontier* 2012, 42, 62, 81, 122, 169; Usman, “A View from the Periphery” 43–61; Okafor, 43–54; Jemkur 33–42; Aremu 149–164). It has also been established that the “laterites of most parts of West Africa lent themselves to exploitation for iron” (Jemkur 33–42) and that “[t]he iron ore, usually in the form of relatively soft rocks, was broken into pieces by hand using stone tools” (Okafor 43–54).

In addition to laterites, other “common and readily available” raw materials for iron production include “refracted clay” used for making tuyères, furnaces and hearth; fuel, mostly timber and/or charcoal and human labour (Okafor 43–54). Thus, in spite of the fact that archaeologists are yet to investigate and come out with material evidence of early iron smelting in Ilorin, it cannot be ruled out completely that ancient Ilorin had no evidence of iron smelting activities.

Apart from the possibility of raw materials for iron working in the Ilorin region, there are other inferences that may be invoked to buttress the contention that Ilorin owed its name to a tradition of metallurgy that belonged to antiquity. First, in a list of historical iron smelting sites in Nigeria, Aremu (149–164) identifies various iron smelting sites named after their industries to include *Isundurin* (“Where we smelt to become iron”), in Osun State; *Agunrin* (“Where we pound iron”), *Igunrin* (“Pounding iron”) and *Iponrin* (“Sharpening iron”), all in Oyo State and nine sites located in what is now Kwara State including Ilorin, Iponrin, Idofin-Ojokolo Mt., Idofin-Igbo Aawo, Olla, Obo Ayegunle, Owa Kajola, Owa Onire and Oba. This, on the one hand, shows that Ilorin is located within a region that had a long tradition of iron technology and therefore could not be an isolated case if it is claimed to have been a renowned centre of African iron metallurgy.

Secondly, of all the places mentioned in Kwara State, only Ilorin (translated “Where we sharpen iron”) and Iponrin (“Sharpening iron”) have their names linked to iron/ironworking. Presently both settlements have no archaeological evidence to corroborate their historical connections with ironworking. This may be due to various factors including lack of archaeological study of the settlements.

Thirdly, writing on traditional processes of iron smelting in Yorubaland, Aremu (149–164) reports that:

In ore preparation, once on the surface, the iron ore is sorted and crushed to gravel size. Once it has been crushed, it is carried to a stream for washing, or water is fetched in order to wash it. After washing, the ore is poured on a coarse mat spread on the ground and left in the sun until it is bone-dry, and then ground into powdery form.

Thus, such acts as “crushing”, “grinding” (*Ilọ/Lilọ*), “pounding” (*Igun/Gigun*), “smelting” and “sharpening” (*Ipon/Pipon*) were integral parts of iron production processes. It is, therefore, a well-attested fact that this tradition of metallurgy continued in Yorubaland well into the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Iron smelting, for instance, continued in Lagbe or Ola-Igbe near Oyo up till 1904 and in Isundunrin until around 1936 (Akinjogbin 55–61). That these kinds of evidence were/are not available for Ilorin was probably because its iron production belonged to an earlier, more prehistoric era and that such tradition had ceased for some time prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to the above, most Yoruba urban centres reportedly had their own ironstone quarrying sites called *Oko ota* or *Oko eta* (ironstone farms—“*Eta*” being the Yoruba term for iron ore), and at least one small furnace (*Ile Iponrin* or *Ile Isunrin*) in the districts (Akinjogbin 2004: 55–61). In Ilorin, there is an area named *Odo-ta*, said to have been derived from *Odo eta* (“*Eta*’s Stream”). This name has some semblance to ironstone quarrying or washing of iron ore. Like other parts of Ilorin, a major geological feature of *Odo-ta* is the lateritic soil. Presently, it is difficult to obtain any credible information on the etymology of *Odo-ta*, the possibility of quarrying of ironstones in the area or the use of *Odo-ta* stream for washing of iron ore before it was sun-dried and ground to powdery form.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that those places reported to have been “famous for their ironstones” like Ilorin and Okemesi could be “presumed” to have “supplied areas less well endowed” (Akinjogbin 55–61). Though there is no evidence of Ilorin’s involvement in such supply of ironstones, Johnson (119–120) strongly indicates that Ilorin was a well-known centre of iron production. Given all these inferences, it should not be difficult to understand why *irin* (iron) is emphasised in the different versions of the etymology of Ilorin. Perhaps, the production of iron might be one of the reasons why Ilorin was “very important centuries before 1800” as recently suggested by Danmole (“Religion, Politics and the Economy” 7). It is, however, not known what role the availability and prospecting for iron played in the apparent traces of early contestations over Ilorin in the traditional accounts of its origin and early history.

Although the place of iron in the processes of settlement foundation and/or state-building has been stressed in a number of studies, evidence for such vis-à-vis the Old Oyo and Ilorin seem non-existent just as it has been reported for Igbomina. For the lack of “direct relationship between iron working in Igbomina and political control”, Usman (43–61) suggests that “Old Oyo involvement in Igbominaland was probably more focused on defense against Nupe raids, than on controlling iron production.” Given the proximity of Igbomina to Ilorin, the same attitude might have been responsible for lack of evidence of involvement of Old Oyo authorities in any attempts to control Ilorin’s iron resources/production. The only reported Old Oyo intervention in Ilorin linked with an alleged appointment of “the first Ajele” by Alaaafin Ojigi (reigned early 18<sup>th</sup>c.) was not in connection with any attempt to control iron production.



However, such intervention is not supported by extant local traditions known to this writer.

Furthermore, that the availability and processing of iron did not influence state building in Ilorin was not a misnomer. Some other settlements with tradition of iron smelting that were still in operation during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were described as “villages” by contemporary observers. Campbell (49–50) who visited Yorubaland in 1859–1860 reported having passed through two “iron-smelting villages” on the road between Oyo and Isehin. Also in late 19<sup>th</sup>c, Mockler-Ferryman (212–213) reported that, after leaving Ilorin, they “came on a small village whose inhabitants apparently devote their time solely to iron-smelting.” Thus, involvement in iron production, at least in northern Yorubaland, seems not to have been significant in the political transformation of settlements with tradition of iron-smelting.

### **The Baruba Tradition on the Founding of Ilorin**

Apart from the early Yoruba settlers, no suggestions or linkages with ironworking, hunting or connections with Oyo-Ile accounted for the arrival/presence of the Baruba suggested to be the “original founder(s)” or the “earliest” pre-Yoruba settler(s) of Ilorin (Jimoh, *Ilorin* 25; Jimoh, “Which is Which” 1). Two dominant postulations are given to support the tradition of Baruba’s “founding” of Ilorin or of their presence predating the arrival of the Yoruba. These are the claims that a sub-section of the “Ilorin core” had been named “*Baruba*” and that the Okuta Ilorin, which Ojo and other Yoruba hunters used for sharpening their weapons, was located near the Baruba’s hut (Jimoh, *Ilorin* 25).

Recently, however, the naming of the Baruba sub-quarters is associated with the halting of “menacing Baruba soldiers from Nupeland (sic) at about the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Olumoh 6). This postulation does not seem to be correct, for there is no record yet of an exclusively Baruba invasion of Ilorin between 1800 and 1810. The two reported invasions of Ilorin involving Baruba warriors were in support of, or alliance with, the Old Oyo: the first led by Ojo Agunbambaru (in c.1797–c.1799) and the second by Siru Kpera/Woru Kura (c. 1835–35). While the former was halted at Ogidi, on the outskirts of Ilorin, the latter was crushed at *Ita-Kudimoh* along the present Pakata Road (Akinwumi 159–170; Jimoh 1994: 91–102). As available evidence indicates, the naming of a section of Idi-Ape quarters as “Baruba” had nothing to do with a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Baruba invasion.



Although nothing is now known of an exclusive era of the Baruba in Ilorin, there is the contention that the earliest Baruba founder(s)/ settlers in Ilorin were expelled or exterminated by the Yoruba (Jimoh, "Which is Which" 1). It seems quite unlikely that the name "Baruba" would have survived till historical times if the Baruba people had been completely wiped out by the Yoruba. It is instructive to observe that, while Ojo is widely said to have been expelled from Ilorin by Eminla, members of his family are usually said to have remained behind and lived at Ile Ala'ase (Jimoh, *Ilorin*: 26 cf. Jimoh, "Which is Which" 1).

It would, therefore, seem that in each of the reported cases of the expulsion of "founders" or "early settlers" of Ilorin, those expelled were the prominent members rather than the entire population. As is well known with traditional histories, such prominent individuals were the foci of oral traditions rather than the entire population. This, perhaps, explains why the "expulsion" or "departure" of a prominent individual is usually followed by a historical blackout or what is usually termed "obscurity" until the next important arrival. Thus, it is not impossible that other Baruba elements remained in Ilorin or relocated to other area just as Eyinla is reported to have left his hut for Afonja (Ikokoro, Chapter I).

Apart from the name "Baruba", there is paucity of historical data corroborating Jimoh's thesis on a Baruba presence predating Yoruba settlement in Ilorin. However, instances of such developments were common phenomena in the traditional history of northern Yorubaland. Hence, "founders", "first settlers" or ruling dynasties of "Yoruba" towns like *Igboho*, *Kishi*, *Saki*, *Ogbomoso* and *Sabe* have been associated with *Baruba* and *Nupe* elements (Law 33–51; Agiri 32–51). For *Ogbomoso*, few kilometres away from Ilorin, such non-Yoruba founder(s) and/or earliest settlers have been identified to include *Aale* (a *Nupe* hunter); *Orisatolu*, a *Borgu* man and a *babalawo*; *Akandie*, also from *Borgu* and a "renegade *Sango* devotee"; and *Soun*, a *Borgu* man whose father had been "a soldier in the service of the *Olugbon*" (Agiri 32–51). The traditional history of *Ogbomoso*, thus, indicates the possibility of the presence of at least the *Baruba* and *Nupe* individuals in the entire northern Yoruba region where *Ogbomoso* and *Ilorin* were established.

Furthermore, it is also explained that right from the establishment of the Old Oyo Kingdom, the Oyo Yoruba had had causes to lock horns with their *Nupe* and *Baruba* neighbours on different occasions; that they regained the control of their old capital at *Oyoro* either in 1570 or 1610

after an earlier invasion, conquest and domination of the Oyo area by *Baruba* conquerors (Law 33–51; Smith, “The Alafin in Exile” 57–77). With regards to Ilorin, located some 64 kilometres south of Oyo-Ile, the circumstances surrounding the earlier settlement of the *Baruba* in Ilorin and their eventual “disappearance” are unclear. This raises some questions the most pertinent of which is whether the earliest “Yoruba” “hunters” to arrive such as *Ojo Isekuse* and *Eminla* became “founders” of Ilorin in the course of attempt(s) to drive out *Baruba* settlers from Ilorin area or to reoccupy it after the expulsion of *Baruba* invaders. Then, it needs to be known whether or not the *Baruba* met other settlers on ground when they settled at Ilorin and the occupational activities of those *Baruba* settlers.

Although Jimoh has recently suggested that the *Baruba* “founders” were expelled by Yoruba “imperialistic usurpers” identified as *Ojo* and *Eminla*, it is not impossible that those *Baruba* elements were initially subjugated and in the long run assimilated by the Yoruba group. It is important to add that one of the periods often suggested for the founding of Ilorin by *Ojo*, namely “16<sup>th</sup> century” (i.e. 1500s) or “around 1600” (i.e. 17<sup>th</sup>c.), seems to be close to the period suggested for the Oyo’s successful expulsion of the *Baruba*/Nupe from Oyoro and reoccupation of their capital (i.e. 1570 or 1610: Law 33–51).

For “Ilorin”, it has been suggested that the *Baruba* must have inhabited the settlement before the 17<sup>th</sup> century (i.e. prior to c. 1600) while *Ojo Isekuse* and *Eminla* came “successively in the 17<sup>th</sup> century”, i.e. in the 1600s (Saliu and Jawondo 1–20). This seems to corroborate the submissions that Ilorin was founded in the 16<sup>th</sup>c. (i.e. 1500s) “even before *Ojo Adeyemi*” (Onikoko 1; Jimba, *Iwe Itan Ilorin* 6; Jimoh 1994: 25). Be that as it may, the arrival of *Ojo* and other Yoruba “hunters” marked the end of what can be called the “*Baruba*’s Ilorin” and ushered in a new phase of Ilorin history—*Ojo-Eminla*’s Ilorin—just as the *Baruba*’s arrival had probably ended (or had been part of) an earlier era.

If the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the *Ojos* had something to do with an organised Old Oyo military expedition to oust the *Baruba* from Ilorin as suggested above, then a period between the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century may be suggested for the advent of *Ojo* and his Yoruba group. In line with Jimoh’s description of the *Ojo-Eminla* group as “imperialistic usurpers” who expelled the *Baruba* from Ilorin, it is possible that this Yoruba intervention in Ilorin resulted in the near destruction of a *Baruba*-dominated “Ilorin”. A similar

punitive military expedition reportedly brought about the destruction of the “first Ibadan” dominated by the Ife and Egba, which gave way to the second Ibadan [largely Egba-dominated]; the latter in turn suffered defeat and desertion to give way to the third [Oyo-Yoruba dominated] Ibadan (Falola 15).

As it might have happened elsewhere, it is possible that the earliest Yoruba “hunters” to arrive Ilorin became “founders” of the settlement in the course of attempt(s) to drive out the *Baruba* and other hostile settlers from the area or to secure it after the expulsion of such anti-Oyo Yoruba group(s). Alternatively, as it happened in Ogbomoso, it is not impossible that the earliest settlers in Ilorin had been composed of Baruba, Yoruba, Nupe, etc. elements involved in different activities—hunting, ironworking, farming, herbal practice, etc. The naming of the settlement as “Ilorin” probably resulted, eventually, from the major activity (ironworking) of one of the earliest groups.

As indicated in all available traditional accounts on the origin and founding of Ilorin, the Ojo/Eminla era was more of an “*Iron-Using Period*” than of iron production, from which Johnson suggests Ilorin derived its name. Even Laderin, whom Johnson describes as “the founder and first ruler of Ilorin”, must have belonged to this later phase rather than an earlier “*Iron-Producing Period*”. Thus, Ojo, Eminla (hunters), and Laderin (a farmer), would seem to have arrived at Ilorin after it must have existed as a land rich in iron-ore deposits (*Ilu Irin*) and a centre of iron production (*Ilu Ilọ-Irin*). That each of them has come to be identified as the “founder” of Ilorin may not be unconnected with the fact that each appeared at the end of a particular historical juncture, which has come to be termed “obscurity” or “oblivion” into which Ilorin is usually reported to have sunk after the “expulsion”, “withdrawal” or “disappearance” of a previous founder/settler(s). Thus, nothing is known of the Baruba, the “earliest settler”/“founder” as soon as Ojo arrived. Ilorin reportedly sank into oblivion following Ojo’s expulsion by Eminla or his self-exile to “Shawo-Ile”. Like his predecessor, Eminla too soon disappeared from the scene thereby sending Ilorin into its peculiar “obscurity” until the arrival of Laderin and the reported activities of his sons, notably the anti-Gaha posture of Pasin and Alugbin (Johnson 199–200). However, local traditions of origin and early history of Ilorin know next to nothing about the Laderins until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the circle of Ilorin’s historical obscurity and limelight came to an end with the arrival of Afonja.

Prior to Afonja's advent, there are no concrete evidence to date the migration and settlement of the "early" settlers in Ilorin. It is only usually assumed that Ojo founded Ilorin "in the 16<sup>th</sup> or around the 17<sup>th</sup> century" and that he was "soon" expelled by Eminla. However, in two accounts compiled in 1912 by Lethem, Assistant Resident of Ilorin Province, and Ikokoro, "the first inhabitant" of Ilorin is named Engla/Eyinla while Afonja is identified as the next major arrival (NAK ILOPROF 900\1912 para. 17; Ikokoro Chapter I). Since Afonja's arrival/settlement at Ilorin can now be dated to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (c.1796; Petition para. 2; Reichmuth 155–173), Engla/Eyinla's "founding" of Ilorin could only have taken place during the 18<sup>th</sup>c. In view of this, the "Ayinla" or "Eyinla" in Ikokoro's *Ta'lif* may not be the same individual as Ojo who is said to have "founded" Ilorin in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century (Onikoko 1; Jimoh *Ilorin* 25). Also, granted that the appropriate transliteration of the name given in the *Ta'lif* as Ilorin's founder is "*Eyinla*" not "*Ayinla*", it is impossible for Ojo-Isekuse to have founded Ilorin in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century, as usually reckoned in some local sources, and to have also hosted Afonja in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ikokoro's *Eyinla* and Lethem's "*Engla*" appear to be the same person who, in traditions current in the early 20<sup>th</sup>c, was identified as a hunter and founder of Ilorin. The popularity of the Eyinla tradition must have made Lethem to suggest that Ilorin was "not an old settlement."

It should be pointed out, however, that the various traditions are not agreed as to the places of origin of the "early" Yoruba founders/settlers. For instance, Oyo-Ile, Gambe-Ilota near Ejidongari, and Ilesha have been given for Ojo, while Oyo-Ile and Ila-Orangun have been suggested for Eminla. The Oyo origin of Ojo-Isekuse and Eminla has, however, been apparently refuted by the claims that Ojo was from Ilesha while Eminla was from Illa-Orangun (Jimoh, *Ilorin*, 26; Sulu). This conflicting claims do not only further compound the controversy over the identity of the founder(s) of Ilorin, but also implies that the "remnants" of Ojo and Eminla, if met in "Ilorin" by the Oyo groups, were "Ijesha" and "Igbona" and were, therefore, probably not recognised by the Oyo Yoruba group(s) as belonging to the "original Yoruba" or "Yoruba proper" within whose Empire "Ilorin" was located.

Apart from the "sharpening" of iron tools and hunting of wild animals dominant in the traditions, there is no information about Ojo's stay and activities in Ilorin prior to his "disappearance". Some traditions claim that he escaped or fled from Ilorin to Shao-Ile (an old settlement

now reported to be in ruins) when Eminla “invaded” Ilorin to punish him for tarnishing the image of fellow hunters by alleged incest. Another tradition states that both hunters had lived peacefully until Ojo decided to leave due to the humiliation and disrespect he had suffered in the hands of Eminla’s son because of his (Ojo’s) childlessness. There is also the claim that both hunters left Ilorin due to the itinerant nature of their profession being “roving hunters” (Hermon-Hodge 63–64, 88–89; Sulu, History; Onikoko 1; Jimoh 1994: 25–26).

As it happened with the “Baruba” in the tradition reported by Jimoh, Ilorin reportedly sank into oblivion after Ojo and Eminla. Such report implies that what was known to be “Ilorin” was no more than the settlement clusters in and around Idi-Ape-Baruba quarters where those early settlers resided and excluded other possible clusters of settlements in the larger Ilorin region by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This perhaps explains why virtually all the earliest sources available on the “founding” and “early history” of “Ilorin” focus more on what can be described as the “nucleus”—the Idi-Ape-Baruba quarters.

The possibility of other clusters of settlements earlier in Ilorin is, however, implied in Omoiya’s analysis (“Challenges for Scholars” 20–35) although the assertion that the people in such settlements were oblivious of each other’s presence is not plausible. However, an earlier settlement of people in other areas that are often presented to have made up an “Ilorin conglomerate” by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Oke Suna, Gambari, and Gaa Olufadi, has often been neglected as they are usually associated with the Afonja-Alimi era (i.e. c.1796–c.1824).

One of those areas, Oke Suna, though destroyed during the third decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has continued to throw up various potential archaeological materials in recent times. One such evidence are the herringbone potsherd pavements (Ismail 21–52), the type of which are described as a distinctive feature of the “classical period” of Ife culture (11<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century) although their earliest evidence in West Africa, dated to 650 AD, was found in Daima in Borno (Gronenborn 449–460; Usman 2012: 54, 92). Such pavements have also been found in other places like Nupe, Ikeja, Ibadan, Kaduna valley, and some parts of northern Yorubaland. Thus, while the archaeological evidence suggests that the settlement of the site that became known as Oke Suna probably belonged to an earlier period of “Ilorin” history, available historical evidence establishes that the area was peopled by individuals/groups from different ethno-cultural origins including Yoruba and Kanuri among others.

Furthermore, the archaeological and historical evidence on Oke Suna also indicate that it must have been a centre of ancient civilisation, peaceful inter-group relations and integration prior to c. 1800. However, Ilorin's traditions of origin have no connection with Ile-Ife, where the herringbone potsherd pavements are among the evidence of its classical civilisation. The Old Oyo, a major area from where some of the earliest Yoruba "founders"/"settlers" of Ilorin had reportedly relocated, has no evidence of the herringbone potsherd pavements. This raises some questions, to which further archaeological and historical research could possibly provide answers.

### Concluding Remarks

Two dominant themes in all extant traditional explanations on the origin and early history of Ilorin are migration and iron. At present, there are two main sources of the migration that is associated with the founding of Ilorin, namely Barubaland and the Old Oyo kingdom. The geological and ecological features of Ilorin, which made it possible for certain occupational activities, seem to have occasioned the early migrations into the settlement from at least those two regions. Hence, the *ilu irin* tradition implies that the Ilorin area was rich in iron-ores, which were eventually exploited for iron working activities such as iron "grinding" and "smelting" (i.e. *ilo irin*). Abundant forest for game such as elephants provided for another major attraction and activity, hunting, which the tradition of *Ilu erin* emphasises.

Given the obvious lack of direct linkages between the two major elements ("*irin*" or iron ore; "*Ilo-irin*", the act/process of iron production, and "*erin*" or elephants/hunting expedition) and the main actors in the two broad categories of traditions, it would seem that each of the traditions of *Ilu irin/Ilo irin* and *Ilu erin* represents different stages in the emergence of Ilorin. Thus, the earliest period of migration/settlement of people in Ilorin was probably dominated by the exploration and exploitation of iron ores. In view of the obvious lack of agreement in the traditions and among scholars of Ilorin history on the identity of the founder(s), some inferences can only be drawn from analysis of available information.

First, the era of each one of those "founders" probably represented a particularly distinct phase in the evolution of Ilorin. Secondly, the dominant reference in each of the extant traditions namely "*irin*" (ironstones/ores), "*Ilo-irin*" (process of iron production) and "*ilu erin*"

(availability and hunting of wild animals) probably represented a major “theme” in each of the evolutionary phases of Ilorin. Of course, the *ilu irin* and *ilo-irin* legends could be taken as complementary. The latter equally strengthens the *ilu erin* legend, since the production of iron tools and weapons must have made other related occupational activities such as hunting and farming not just possible but more efficient.

Although the possession of iron weapons is known to have enhanced processes related to state formation, the extent to which iron production in Ilorin, as the iron-production legends suggest, contributed to such process of political transformation of the settlement is difficult to say. This is because the information derivable from the various legends of Ilorin origin does not contain facts related to state-formation in the earliest phase of its foundation. Hence, most of the available interpretations of the legends seem to agree that what was Ilorin before the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was no more than a “village” or “small settlement”. This status of an iron-producing “village” or “small settlement” agrees with the image of some other iron-producing “villages” reported by observers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Based on available accounts, there is no enough evidence to conclude that those often described as the earliest settlers in Ilorin were involved in activities (iron working) responsible for the naming of the settlement. As Onikoko informs us, the [origin and early] “history” of Ilorin “predated” Ojo-Isekuse often reckoned to be its founder. However, attempts to account for a pre-Ojo Ilorin are yet to provide enough details of historical developments in an era now said to have been dominated by the presence and activities of the Baruba.

Furthermore, the fact that available traditional historical information on the pre-emirate Ilorin, despite laying emphasis on iron (*irin*), has no clear, conclusive references to iron production and its relationship with the founding of Ilorin is suggestive of the possibility that such tradition of metallurgy might have belonged to more pre-historic times. Hence, like other later phases in the evolution of Ilorin, after which the settlement is often said to have sunk into “obscurity”, an earlier phase of an “iron-producing Ilorin” might have been followed by an “era of obscurity” during which “nothing” historically significant took place and about which we know next to nothing apart from the survival of the name “Ilo-irin” and vague ideas as to its etymology.

Furthermore, Johnson’s Yoruba-linked explanation of the etymology of “Ilorin” is, though at present plausible, appears to be another linguistic



explanation like that on the Baruba's "Ironi" put forward by Salio and Jawondo. However, Johnson's assertion that Laderin "founded" the town is not supported by "facts" from various local traditions on the origin of Ilorin. A combination of the key elements in the various traditions analysed here—*Ilu erin*, *Ilu irin* and *Ilo irin*—indicates that ancient Ilorin probably began as an *Ilu irin*, a settlement rich in iron ores. With the adoption of appropriate "technology" for ironworking by some of the early settlers, it became *Ilu Ilo-irin*, a place for iron production ("iron grinding" and "smelting"). Since the legendary Okuta Ilorin has no physical evidence of iron grinding/sharpening, it is likely that the word "Ilorin" was probably not derived from "the object for sharpening iron". Rather it seems to have come from both the "act" and "place" of "iron grinding" (i.e. *Ilo-Irin* and "*Ilu ti n lo irin*"). This is in line with Johnson's account, Jimba's explanation, as well as the dominance of "*irin*" (iron) in all extant local explanations of "Ilorin". It also agrees with the suggestion that "Ilorin" must have been derived from "vague references" to geographical/ecological features of the area and occupational activities of the early settlers.

The above position is further strengthened by the evidence of iron production from various settlements in the entire region within which Ilorin is located. The dominance of the Yoruba language in nearly all the traditions on the naming of the settlement also compares with that of Ogbomoso where, although the "earliest" settlers are identified as including Nupe and Baruba elements (whose occupations equally included elephant-hunting and herbal medical practice), the name was Yoruba.

Finally, contrary to Oyediji's submission, the reported Oyo Yoruba's saying, which describes Ilorin as "*Ilu ti n lo irin Abòntásê omo eniyan*" ("[Ilorin,] the city that grinds iron to powdery dust, not to talk of human beings") was not originally, and not necessarily, an apparently derogatory remark coined by the Oyo Yoruba to illustrate 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ilorin people's alleged "cunning and slippery" character and "astuteness" particularly as "pastmasters in the art of inter-communal and inter-ethnic diplomacy"—an ability, which is suggested to have earned Ilorin the "epithet" "*Ilorin Mesu Jamba*." Perhaps the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Oyo people still remembered the mastery and skillfulness of ancient Ilorin in the art and science of iron technology, which they then compared with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ilorin's astuteness and mastery in the art of warfare and diplomacy. As may be inferred from Johnson's explanation of the



etymology of Ilorin, it was probably not surprising to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Oyo Yoruba that a city that was militarily and politically astute and skillful in “grinding” powerful polities to “powdery dust” during the century had hitherto been known or reported in “ancient times” to be very skillful in “grinding iron to powdery dust” and had thus probably derived its name and fame from “iron-grinding” or “*Ilo-Irin*.”

## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for the following for their inputs to drafts of this paper: Dr. I. A. Jawondo, Department of History & International Studies, University of Ilorin; Dr. M. B. Salau, University of Mississippi and Visiting Scholar to the Department of History & Heritage Studies, Kwara State University; Professor M. M. Jimba, Arabic Unit, Department of Linguistics, African and European Languages, Kwara State University (KWASU); Dr. Yahaya Eliasu, Mrs. Hadizah S. A., Ms. Josephine B. O., Mr. A. A. Abdul-Wasiu, Mr. Adedayo, and Mr. P. G. Ajekigbe all Department of Religions, History and Heritage Studies, College of Humanities, KWASU.

## Works Cited

- Agiri, B. A. “When was Ogbomoso founded? An Analysis of the Traditions of Origin of an Oyo-Yoruba town with Special Reference to the Problem of Chronology and Feedback.” *Transafrican Journal of History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1976, pp. 32–51.
- Ajadi, B. S., A. Adeniyi, and M. T. Afolabi. “Impact of Climate on Urban Agriculture: Case Study of Ilorin City, Nigeria.” *Global Journal of Human Social Science*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2011, pp. 24–30.
- Akinjogbin, I. A. “The Impact of Iron in Yorubaland.” *The Origins of Iron Metallurgy in Africa: New Light on Its Antiquity, West and Central Africa*, edited by Hamady Bocoum, UNESCO Publishing, 2004, pp. 55–61.
- Akinwumi, D. O. “The Oyo-Borgu Military Alliance of 1835: A Case Study of Pre-Colonial Military History.” *Transafrican Journal of History*, vol. 21, 1992, pp. 159–170.
- Aleru, J. O. “Archaeological sites in Igbominaland North Central Nigeria: The Need for Systematic Archaeological Research.” *West African Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 23, 1993, pp. 37–50.
- Aleru, J. O. Personal interview. 2012, 2013.

- Aremu, D. A. "Iron Roads in Africa: A Contribution from Nigeria." *The Origins of Iron Metallurgy in Africa: New Light on Its Antiquity, West and Central Africa*, edited by Hamady Bocoum, UNESCO Publishing, 2004, pp. 149–164.
- Balogun, S. A. "Historical Significance of Ilorin—A Preliminary Survey." *Confluence: An Academic Journal of Kwara State Council of Arts and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1978, pp. 7–25.
- Bowen, T. J. *Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856*. Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857.
- Campbell, R. *A Pilgrimage to My Motherland: An Account of a Journey among the Egbas and Yorubas of Central Africa in 1859-60*. W. J. Johnson, 1860.
- Clapperton H. *Journal of Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa*. John Murray, 1829.
- Crowther, S. *A Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*. Seeleys, 1852.
- Danmole, H. O. "Religion, Politics and the Economy in Nineteenth Century Ilorin: Some Reflections." Paper presented at First in the Lecture Series of the Centre for Ilorin Studies, University of Ilorin, December 12, 2012, pp. 55–56.
- Danmole, H. O. "The Ta'lif Akhbār al-Qurūn min Umarā' Bilad Ilūrin: A Critique." *History in Africa*, vol. 11, 1984, pp. 57–67.
- Duff, E. C., and P. M. Dwyer. "Ilorin Province." *Notes on the Tribes of Northern Nigeria*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Frank Cass and Co Ltd., 1965, pp. 443–453.
- Falola, T. *The Political Economy of a Pre-colonial African State: Ibadan, 1830–1900*. University of Ife Press Ltd., 1984.
- Gronenborn, D. "Kundiye: Archaeology and Ethnoarchaeology in the Kala-Balge Area of Borno State, Nigeria." *Aspects of African Archaeology: Papers from the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Pan-African Association for Prehistory and Related Studies*, University of Zimbabwe, 1996, pp. 449–460.
- Hermon-Hodge, H. B. *Gazetteer of Ilorin Province*. George Allen and Unwin, 1929.
- Ikokoro, A. A. *Ta'lif Akhbar al-Qurun min Umara Bilad Ilurin*. Centre for Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1912.
- Ismail, S. O. "Ilorin Potsherd Pavements and the Reconstruction of the Culture History of a Frontier City: The Historical Significance of some Neglected Artifacts." *West African Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, pp. 21–52.
- Jemkur, J. F. "The Beginnings of Iron Metallurgy in West Africa." *The Origins of Iron Metallurgy in Africa: New Light on Its Antiquity, West and Central*

- Africa*, edited by Hamady Bocoum, UNESCO Publishing, 2004, pp. 33–42.
- Jimba, M. M. Personal interview. 18 April 2016.
- Jimba, S. *A Short History of Ilorin*. Jimba Books Productions, 1981.
- Jimba, S. *Iwe Itan Ilorin*, Jimba Books Production, 1990.
- Jimoh, L. A. K. “Which is Which: Ilorin Afonja or Ilorin Garin Alimi?” Being text of a Lecture prepared for presentation at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Public Lecture Series of the Centre for Ilorin Studies (CILS), University of Ilorin, December 12, 2013.
- Jimoh, L. A. K. *Ilorin: The Journey So Far*. Atoto Press, 1994.
- Johnson, S. *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of British Protectorate*. C. S. S. Bookshop, 1921.
- Lander, R. L., and J. Lander. *Journal of an Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger*, vol. 2. John Murray, 1832.
- Lander, R. *Records of Captain Clapperton’s Last Expedition to Africa*. Vol. I, Henry Colburn, 1830.
- Law, R. C. C. “How Many Times Can History Repeat Itself? Some Problems in the Traditional History of Oyo.” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1985, 1, pp. 33–51.
- Lloyd, P. C. *The Political Development of Yoruba Kingdoms in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971.
- Mockler-Ferryman, A. F. *Up The Niger: Narrative of Major Claude MacDonald’s Mission to the Niger and Benue Rivers, West Africa*. George Philip & Son, 1892.
- NAK Ilorprof 3737/11 Ilorin Re-Organization 1939–1940: “Ilorin Town-Report” by Mr. A. L. Milroy.
- NAK Ilorprof 4 1900/1912, Re-Assessment Report by Asst. Resident G. J. Lethem.
- Okafor, E. E. “Twenty-five Centuries of Bloomery Iron Smelting in Nigeria.” *The Origins of Iron Metallurgy in Africa*, edited by H. Bocoum, UNESCO, 2004, pp. 43–54.
- Olumoh, O. A. “Conflict and Crises in Ilorin Emirate, 1823–1897.” M. A. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1997.
- Omoiya, Y. S. “Challenges for Scholars in Locating Historical Origin of Frontier Settlements: The Ilorin Example.” *Ilorin Journal of History and International Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 20–35.

- Omoiya, Y. S. "The Balogun Institution in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries Ilorin: A Study in the Dynamics of Emirate System." M. Phil. Diss., Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 2000.
- Omoiya, Y. S. *The Origin and British Colonial Impact on the Cosmopolitan Community of Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Lincom Europa, 2009.
- Onikoko, S. A. T. *A History of Ilorin Emirate*. Sat Adis Press, 1992.
- Oyedeki, N. "Language in Ethnic Rivalries: An Analysis of Ethnocentric Use of Yoruba in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Yorubaland." *War and Peace in Yorubaland 1793–1893*, edited by in Adeagbo Akinjogbin, Heinemann Educational Books, 1998, pp. 451–459.
- Oyegun, R. O. *Water Resources Development in Kwara State*, Matanmi Press, 1985, pp. 3–5.
- Reichmuth, S. "Imam Umaru's Account of the Origins of the Ilorin Emirate: A Manuscript in the Heinz Solkén Collection, Frankfurt" *Sudanic Africa*, vol. 4, Special Issue on Kano, 1993, pp. 155–173.
- Saliu, H. A., and I. A. Jawondo. "Ilorin Emirate: Its People and Politics." *Ilorin: Centre of Learning*, edited by S. A. Jimoh, Jimson Publishers, 2006, pp. 1–20.
- Smith, A. "A Little New Light on the Collapse of the Alafinate of Yoruba." *Studies in Yoruba History and Culture*, edited by G. O. Olusanya, University of Ibadan Press, pp. 42–71.
- Smith, R. "The Alafin in Exile: A Study of the Igboho Period in Oyo History." *Journal of African History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1965, pp. 57–77.
- Sulu, M. *History of Ilorin*. Typescript, Rhodes House, Oxford, 1953.
- Usman, A. A. "A View from the Periphery: Northern Yoruba Villages during the Old Oyo Empire, Nigeria." *Journal of Field Archaeology*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2000, pp. 43–61.
- Usman, A. A. "Ceramic Seriation, Sites Chronology, and Old Oyo Factor in North Central Yorubaland, Nigeria." *African Archaeological Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, September 2003, pp. 149–169.
- Usman, A. A. *The Yoruba Frontier: A Regional History of Community Formation, Experience, and Changes in West Africa*, Carolina Academic Press, 2012.