The Cultural Work of Yoruba Ethnogenesis
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... that peace should reign universally, with prosperity and advancement, and that the disjointed units should all be once more welded into one under one head from the Niger to the coast as in the happy days of ABIODUN, so dear to our fathers, that chauvinistic spirit disappear, and above all that Christianity should be the principle religion in the land – paganism and Mohammedanism having had their full trial – should be the wish and prayer of every true son of Yoruba!

With these words the Reverend Samuel Johnson, Pastor of Oyo, brought to an end the main part of his great work, nearly 700 pages long, The History of the Yoruba, from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate (Johnson, 1921:5-2). Johnson’s History is not only the indispensable foundation for all historical and anthropological work on the Yoruba. It also has pride of place in a body of work produced by the Christian Yoruba intelligentsia – the creation of an orthography and a literary language, the translation of the Scriptures, local and ethnic histories large and small, written in English or Yoruba, studies of Yoruba traditional religion variously interpretive, polemical, or historical – through which the Yoruba have come to know themselves precisely as such. That we study a people called ‘the Yoruba’ at all is due largely to them.

To appreciate this achievement for what it is, we have to call into question two contentions common in recent anthropological writing on ethnicity. The first is that ethnicity, though expressed in cultural terms, does not require any cultural explanation. Abier Cohen’s study of Hausa ethnicity in the Yoruba town of Ibadan (Cohen, 1969), a classic of West African ethnography, argues this forcefully. The second contention, which in a sense is a corollary of the first, is that its explanation need not refer to the past. This may as well take a structuralist as a functionalist form: as Maryr McDonald puts it in a recent study of Breton nationalism, ‘the identity of a people is a product of the contemporary structural context in which it exists’ (McDonald, 1986:333). Against this ‘presentism’, I argue

the need for a properly cultural and historical explanation of ethnicity. But ‘culture’ must not be seen as a mere precipitate or bequest of the past. Rather, it is an active reflection on the past, a cultural work. And because work supposes a real object, in this case historical experience, an adequate explanation has to be a fully historical one.

It is an irony, then, that Cohen presents his Hausa study as ‘social history’ (Cohen, 1969:25-7) – though it is so in a significantly limited sense. An account of selected changes in one society, he argues, will provide the anthropologist with a contrast case to the present; and this will enable him ‘to isolate variables in a far more satisfactory manner than in the comparison between different societies, with different cultural traditions’ (Cohen, 1974:20). That is, culture can be excluded because it is held constant. A true sociological functionalist, Cohen argues that ‘institutions cannot be sociologically explained in terms of past origins or events’ (ibid.:21). Concretely, his explanation of why the Ibadan Hausa adopted the Tijaniyya order is in terms of its immediate local consequences, as providing ‘solutions to some of the problems they faced as a result of the coming of party politics’ (Cohen, 1969:122). Cohen is unconcerned with questions about why individual Hausa became Tijanis or about the dynamics of Tijaniyya expansion itself. None of this matters, because ‘within the contemporary situation ethnicity is essentially a political phenomenon, as traditional customs are used only as idioms and mechanisms for political alignments’ (Cohen, 1974:4; cf. 1969:190). On this view, religious arguments, the historical experience of the Hausa, and their representation of it or ethnohistory, are equally beside the point.

In contrast with Cohen, McDonald takes ethnohistory seriously as a cultural object: modern ethnic or minority identity is commonly sought through historicist argument: the present is understood by reference to the past, and the interpretation of the past is made to generate the present’ (McDonald, 1986:333). Yet surely it puts a great strain on any concept of identity to attach it so firmly to ‘the contemporary structural context’. For as its etymology implies (idem, ‘the same’), the primary thrust of the concept is to assert some degree of continuity despite change, across contexts. As a social psychological notion, it conveys some idea of an internal dynamic to the development of the self, of the constraining or enabling power of past experience (Erstein, 1978:5-6, 44-7). Even the sharpest kind of identity change, such as religious conversion, becomes intelligible only in the light of the continuities and criteria of value, which run through from past to present. To apply the notion of identity at a collective level is precisely to invite attention to the facilitation of common action by shared past experiences. On this view, effective ethnic identity is thus likely to depend on the realities of the past as well as on the demands of ‘the contemporary structural context’.

These considerations weigh especially if we see ethnogenesis as arising
from a relationship between ethnic intellectuals or "missionaries" and the less-concerned mass of the ethnic "constituency". The sociologists who have focused on the relationship between intellectuals and mass - Smith (1981), for example - show fewer traces of the blocking presentism to ethnic mobilization - regionally uneven development, the expansion of nation-states, multi-ethnic urbanization, etc., still has to be worked at in cultural terms. The resultant ethnohistory or "historicist argument" has been the standard means of intellectuals or ethnic missionaries to raise their fellows' consciousness. But despite the "invention of tradition" that it may involve, unless it also makes genuine contact with people's actual experience, that is with a history that happened, it is not likely to be effective. Only in a historical analysis can we see Yoruba ethnicity for what it is: a process or a project, rather than a structure.

Turning now to the Yoruba case, can we agree with Cohen's view that "ethnicity is ... basically a political, not a cultural phenomenon" (Cohen, 1969:190)? That it is political cannot be in any doubt. The Yoruba, like the Igbo and the Hausa, are one of the "mega-tribal" groupings particularly characteristic of Nigeria's vast, complex, and regionalized political system. As such it is a modern category entirely, in that the vast bulk of people who now know themselves as Yoruba, did not do so in 1900. Originally the word referred to only one Yoruba grouping, the Oyo. Yoruba ethnic identity began to be adopted by other groups (e.g. Ijesa, Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ondo) from the 1920s, as migration, cash-cropping, education, and conversion to the world religions drew more people into a Nigeria-wide sphere of social relations. From the late 1930s, when nationalism really began to get underway, the Yoruba began to shape themselves politically against other "tribes", especially the Ijebu in the political crucible of Lagos. Between 1945 and 1951, the nationalist movement in southern Nigeria fragmented, and national politics assumed the form of a competition between three parties, each associated with one of the "mega-tribes" that enhanced its national strength by gaining support from minority tribes in other regions; but each also had to contend with the propensity of groupings and communities within the mega-tribe in its base region to pursue their more local rivalries (which often had deep historic roots) to the support of rival parties. Thus Ilesha, Ibadan, and several other Yoruba communities supported the Ijebu Party (the NCNC) against the Yoruba Party (the Action Group) throughout most of the period 1951-66. Ethnic consciousness, at the level of the mega-tribe, still needed to be worked at. Yet it was, to good effect: by 1979, when civilian politics returned, the Action Group's successor, the UPN, won a much greater share of the Yoruba vote than its predecessor had done. We can sum it up by saying that in Nigeria, administrative units (the regions, and later the "states") and ethnic groups have helped to shape each other through the medium of politics. Yet culture was an essential part of this ethnic politics. While it might "function" to justify a special ethnic interest in terms of a higher or wider value, it was made plausible by its role in the historic formation of the ethnic groups themselves. For the NPC, the Hausa party, it was Islam (Paden, 1986); for the Yoruba parties it was "Jumia" or "enlightenment", a complex of development values rooted in Christianity and western education (Peel, 1978). The iconography of UPN in the 1979 election - its party symbol a lighted torch, its motto "light over Nigeria" encapsulated a history as well as an ideology. The policy priority given to education by UPN took it a higher stage the achievements of its Action Group predecessor in the field of primary education in the 1950s. Furthermore, we find that Yoruba ethnicity was a cultural project before it was a political instrument. The Action Group (founded 1951) had its origins in a cultural organization, Egbe Omo Oduduwa (founded 1945). More importantly, the efficient cause of the extension of Yoruba identity to originally non-Yoruba peoples was education and Christianization through the means of Standard Yoruba, a mission-devised language form. Beyond the Oyo (the "Yoruba Proper", as Johnson called them), the first Yoruba everywhere were teachers, catechists, and clergymen; the Christian evangelists were, unavoidably, ethnic missionaries too. The ethnic message that came wrapped in this language of literacy was itself fashioned as a response to a nineteenth-century experience. The sophistication of this message lay in the way it combined an interpretation of the historical experience of Yoruba individuals and communities with a plausible rationale of the particular role of its promoters, the evangelists of Christianity.

The Yoruba, of course, did not present a cultural tabula rasa to the missions; the cultural map was not to be redrawn as arbitrarily as the political map of colonial Africa. Beyond the level of their "town" (ile) and certain named regional groupings, the peoples who would come to call themselves Yoruba might recognize their wider affinity in one of two distinct (but largely overlapping) ways: by similarity of dialect, and by shared customs. These customs included certain principles of political organization, a number of religious cults, and traditions of dynastic descent from a sacred centre, Ile-Ife. However, many of these customs either fell short, or were shared with non-Yoruba too, particularly Dahomey and Benin. Language came first in the definition of this new, wider ethnicity. The Yoruba seem to stand out here, in comparison with their neighbours of the West African forest: the Akans, the Ceb-speakers (including Dahomey and the Ewe) and the Edo-speakers (including Benin). In none of these
others do there develop such a close identification of a modern ethnic group with a linguistic community. Superficially, this seems surprising, since the Yoruba were far less united politically in the nineteenth century, when the collapse of Oyo left no stably dominant power among them, such as Asante, Dahomey, or Benin. On a deeper view, however, it appears that this very political vacuum provided the conditions in which a new cultural agency, the Protestant missions, could exploit existing affinities of language and tradition to promote a more explicit regional integration of a cultural kind.

It was in their diaspora, the result of the slave trade, that the Yoruba-speaking peoples first acquired the collective designation of a single name—*Aku*—and particularly in Sierra Leone. Here a linguistically defined category emerged to embrace all the Yoruba-speaking groups. This was the *Aku*, derived from the Yoruba mode of greeting, *ọrọ* or *ọrọ*; So a leading Aku, Isaac Benjamin Pratt (d.1880), is described on his memorial tablet in St George’s Cathedral, Freetown, as ‘a native of the Ifeh section of the Aku tribe’. The CMS missionary, S.W. Koelle, in his great *Polyglotta Africana* (1854), gave lexical items for twelve dialects of Aku (of which Yoruba was one). He remarked that:

> Aku was not the historical name by which these numerous tribes are united in one nation; but it is retained here because the historical name is not known at present. . . . The missionaries of the country ought to search after the proper national name of the whole Aku country. For the last few years they have very erroneously made use of the name ‘Yoruba’ in reference to the whole nation. . . .

(Koelle, 1854:5)

How very German and Protestant is this presumption that nations are, first of all, language groups! Koelle says that to use the word Yoruba for the whole nation is like calling Wurttembergers (as he was himself) or Bavarians, Prussians. He was right. Yet, thanks to the CMS, ‘Yomba’ it became. Contrary to Koelle’s supposition, there was no historical or proper national name for Yorubaland; but the CMS adopted the Hausa name of the largest political unit within it, Oyo. The reason why they chose this Hausa name seems to have been: that the first eyewitness accounts of Oyo were published in England in 1829–32 by travellers who were oriented towards the kingdoms of the far interior and who used Hausa as their language of communication.

If one wants a precise time and place for the inauguration of the modern Yoruba language, it would be in 1844, when Samuel Ajayi Crowther opened the first Yoruba service in Freetown with a text to declare a historical project: ‘Therefore that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God’ (Luke 1:35). The language itself, whose orthography took another thirty years to settle, was thoroughly hybrid:

its morpho-syntax predominantly Oyo/Ibadan, its phonemes markedly of Abeokuta, its lexicon enriched by coinings and the speech of Lagos and Yoruba diaspora (Adetugbo, 1967; Ajayi, 1960). It was most strange to the peoples of the forest who had not known Oyo rule, and so it was indeed largely a *Yoruba* language. Yet it was the Reverend James Johnson, Sierra Leone born of Ijesha/Ijebu descent, who actually had to learn to speak Yoruba when he was transferred from Sierra Leone to Lagos in 1874, who wrote that ‘the Bible in the native tongue’ was the best thing about the Yoruba Mission.9 This Book must influence the religion, the coming literature, the thought, the language, the phrasology, and the life of the country, if it be rightly and diligently used.’ Few missionary prophecies have been so well fulfilled.

The missions that began work in the Yoruba country in the 1840s possessed an advantage that few primary missions elsewhere in Africa had: their personnel already included converts made in Sierra Leone, and in several stations they found a core of nominal or potential Christians among the Saro (as returnees from Sierra Leone were known). The importance of the missions’ Saro base, however, lay not so much in the fillip it gave to the growth of local congregations, as in the fact that the Saro’s personal experiences of loss and dislocation were quintessential of the upheavals of the country at large. From the 1820s onwards the Yoruba country was in a state of near-continuous violent upheaval. Oyo’s collapse produced knock-on effects as refugees flooded to the south and east. The Oyo exiles who predominated in Sierra Leone in the 1820s gave way to Egba in the 1830s and Ijesha in the 1840s. The Egba’s new capital at Abeokuta, the rival Oyo successor states Ijaye and Ibadan, the ancient Ijebu kingdom nearer the coast, were periodically locked in conflict. By the early 1880s virtually the whole of the Yoruba country was at war. In popular social consciousness this was an age of ‘confusion’, of the ‘world being spoiled’ (*alaye baju*), of the paramountcy of the ‘hot’, angry gods like Ogun (god of war), Sopona (god of smallpox), and above all Essu (the intertemporal trickster deity, breaker of rules, associated with markets and crossroads), whom the Christians identified as Satan.10 To this experience the missionaries and especially their Saro-Yoruba personnel brought a social and historical diagnosis that was widely felt to be telling.11

The social gospel of the missions was based squarely on an early version of modernization theory, as the Reverend C.A. Gollner reported in one of his earliest sermons, at Badagry in 1845:

> ... in times gone past white man’s country was like there’s [sic] is now: worshipping natural phenomena as gods, making idols ... and missionaries came with the same book as he does. They prayed to that God, and wars ceased and peace was established and so, by and by the country became good ... To make your country stand the same as
white man's country – this is the reason why we came and why we wish to preach the word of God to you . . . .

But there is the characteristic weakness of modernization theory: how to establish the relevance of the alien model in terms of the particular history of the society where it is to be applied? Some providential history can help a lot. Thus the Reverend H. Townsend, in his 1847 journal from Abeokuta:

He reviews the collapse of Oyo authority, the desolation of the old Egba towns, and wars involving Ife, Owa and Ijebu. These tribes owed allegiance, he says, to the Yoruba King, but 'now there is no connexion but what arises from speaking a common language'. But I doubt not that all that has happened in this country in these afflictions have been from God and are intended, thro' his great mercy, as a means to extend the knowledge of Himself in Africa.' While war was destroying the Egba towns, the missions were being consolidated in Sierra Leone, which became an asylum for the victims of the wars. The people desire to return home. 'A door in the hearts of the people is opened for us. The work is not of man, but of the Lord.'

All this would be equally the view of his Saro colleagues, but their search for meaning and salvation went to deeper levels. For them the essential issue was their personal authenticity as members of a community. It could not be resolved as a matter of being, but only as a matter of becoming. Self-realization, the missionary enterprise, the redefinition of community, and the development of the country were all aspects of one total process.

The Saro evangelists were doubly alienated from their society. Enforced exile had broken many old ties and opened new ones. We should be careful not to exaggerate this: much of the home cultures was kept up in Sierra Leone, and the missionaries in Yorubaland were always complaining of the backsliding of the Saro there. But those who were so alienated must have been especially prone to the further alienation that was an inevitable effect of the conscientious adoption of the Christian religion in its Victorian form. The ambivalence of church personnel towards their communities – drawn to them (as home) and repelled by them (as pagan) led them to adopt a two-tier ethnic identification: with their town or 'tribe', entities with a real political existence, and with a concept of Yoruba as a potentially Christian nation, a thing existing only in posse but prefigured in the network of Christian congregations using the Yoruba Bible. In the ethnic discourse of the missionaries, the two levels are distinguished, as when 'Ijebu (another tribe of the Yoruba nation)' is seen as an entity of the same order as Ibadan and the Egba. But the term Yoruba remained to the end of the century and beyond, ambiguous since it referred to one of the existing parts, as well as to the notion whole.

The tensions of local community membership and Christian obligation are well illustrated in the case of Abeokuta, where the missions won their greatest initial successes. Here, the mission had the advantage of a large group of Saro returnees and the patronage of influential chiefs. By 1877 there were 2,295 baptized Anglicans at Abeokuta compared with only 401 at Ibadan. Yet the CMS Superintendent, the Saro James Johnson, was hardly elated by this. In his view, the Abeokuta church had become all too well adjusted to Egba conditions: domestic slave-holding and polygamy, which he abhorred, were rife among its leading members. Johnson considered that the problem was rooted in what he called 'tribal connexion': all CMS agents at Abeokuta by the late 1870s were Egba, and so general was the view that no 'stranger . . . should question Egbas in Egbaland, that Yorubans (i.e. Oyo) were known to refuse church appointments there. Johnson even proposed the introduction of a 'superior element . . . from without, from Sierra Leone', to replace compromised church agents; so it is not surprising that he was all but driven from Abeokuta with taunts of 'Ijebu man' ringing in his ears.

Elsewhere it was more common for the Christians, at least until late in the century, to keep a low profile in political and military affairs, to be reckoned (as at Ibadan) 'a quiet people averse to fame and worldly honour'. Particularly the full-time agents (clergy, teachers, catechists, scripture readers) were a dispersed or supralocal status group that saw itself as Yoruba, in the extended sense of the word. Clergy were not usually natives of the towns where they ministered. For a man like the Reverend D. Olubi, for over two decades the Egba pastor of Ibadan's main CMS congregation, the only possible stance was to hold aloof from Egba and Ibadan chauvinism alike. The whole pattern of communication and association of the clergy was pan-Yoruba. There was much intermarriage between clerical families of different towns, and church conferences (usually in Lagos), brought them together from all over the warring up-country. Professionally, they found the blockades and disruptions caused by the wars deeply exasperating. Though many Christian laymen in Lagos were vehement supporters of their communities in the interior, it was a clerical initiative that launched peace discussions in 1882. This was in the name of a Yoruba patriotism hardly yet meaningful outside their circle: 'invoked . . . as patriots and especially as Christians to see that all tribal feelings and jealousies be set aside in the interests of peace to their fatherland' (Johnson, 1921:480). In the negotiations of the 1880s, which eventually led to the resolution of the military statelet, key mediating roles were played by two Saro clergymen: Charles Phillips on the side of the Ekitiparepo and Samuel Johnson of Ibadan.
The wars were the central experience of the Yoruba-speaking peoples in the nineteenth century, and Samuel Johnson, supremely, was their interpreter. Where better to do this from than Ibadan, the ‘lion’ of the Yoruba country? Samuel Johnson had come to Ibadan from Sierra Leone in 1857 at the age of 11 with his father, a scripture reacter. After secondary education at Abeokuta, Johnson became a teacher, at Ibadan, and rose through catechist to priest, at Oyo.\(^{10}\) A prime objective of Johnson’s History is to present the wider Yoruba identity promoted by the missions, as the culmination of Oyo history. To make this more plausible, the extent of Old Oyo’s regional hegemony is greatly exaggerated. And because the modern concept of a Yoruba nation has such clearly Christian origins (and of course because Johnson was a clergyman) he also needs to place Christianity firmly in the pattern of Yoruba history.

Johnson’s History falls into two parts. Part I is ethnographic, a survey of the language, customs, and social organization of the Yoruba, including some account of the various nor-Oyo groups. Since the Yoruba conventionally express political distinctiveness in terms of distinct stories (titan) of origin, Johnson presents legends of origin ‘as they are related here’. The ancestor of the Yoruba, Odudua, son of Lamurudu (Nimrod), is held to have been driven out of Mecca for having relapsed to paganism and with his idols migrated to Ife. As Robin Law (1984) has shown, this legend is in all its details drawn from Muslim Hausa sources. Indigenous foundation stories by contrast represent the Yoruba, indeed the human race, as descending from heaven to earth at Ife. Its primary purpose is plain, to affiliate the Yoruba to the general stock of humanity, and in this it answers a question that missionaries steeped in Biblical history had already posed of the Yoruba. ‘From what branch of the Noahic family did they descend?’ Nimrod descended through Cush from Ham. That Johnson uses a Muslim Hausa version, like the earlier adoption of the Hausa ethnic name Yoruba, indicates merely the quarter in which he had first become pressing to frame answers to questions about wider group identities and relations. But Johnson does not rest here. He is more than happy to accept that the Yoruba came from the East, but not that they are apostate Muslims. From several details, he argues instead that they probably came from Upper Egypt, and that their ancestors were probably Coptic Christians (Johnson, 192:3–7). He finds confirming evidence in parallels between some elements of Yoruba mythology and episodes of Scripture, both of the Old and New Testaments. Johnson thus cleverly places Christianity as a precedent in the Yoruba’s own history; conversion is merely a recovery of what was lost, paganism an unhappy interlude.

Part II, the chronological part, divides Yoruba history into four periods. The first is really a short prehistory, dealing with the ‘Mythological Kings and eponymous heroes’ who link Oyo to Ife. That leaves the remaining three as a dialectical triad: (1) Oyo’s growth up to Abiodun (d.1789), in whose reign its empire reached its maximum extent; (2) Old Oyo’s progressive collapse, under pressure internally and from the Fulani jihad, the dispersion of its people and the eventual establishment of new Oyo towns further south, particularly Ibadan, c.1837; (3) covering the rest of the nineteenth century, entitled ‘Arrest of disintegration. Inter-tribal wars. British Protectorate’. It is this last period, to which 376 pages are devoted (well over half the whole), which is the real glory of the work.

It was a bold conception of Johnson’s, to present those sixty years of ‘inter-tribal wars’ leading up to the British Protectorate as a higher-level replay of the ascent of Yoruba (Oyo) power to the happy days of ABIODUN. In its view, there were two positive features of this period: the growth of Ibadan and the Christian missionary enterprise. Though these both meant ‘salvation’ of a certain kind for the Yoruba, they implied radically opposed values. Ibadan was an intensely militaristic state, many of whose core institutions such as slavery and polygyny, let alone its ‘heathenism’, were anathema to the missions. The narrative of Johnson’s journals, mostly from the 1870s, is continuously threaded round a series of oppositions: war/peace, idolatry/God, Ibadan/the Church, darkness/enlightenment. Yet a major source of the power of Johnson’s writing is that he does not try to evade or mute this contradiction but looks for its transcendence in history.

The History is more reflective and distanced, more philosophical in the eighteenth-century sense, as well as much more finely worked; in places one can identify passages based on particular sections of the journals.\(^{20}\) Here Johnson’s identification with Ibadan emerges more clearly. It takes two forms. First, his human sympathy and attention is directly engaged by the actions and passions of the leading personalities of a very turbulent community. Second, he finds a providential aspect even to Ibadan’s militarism. Though Oyo at its core, it has promoted a wider-than-Oyo sense of Yoruba community:

[AFTER 1840] the history of the Yorubas centred largely at Ibadan which continued to attract to itself ardent spirits from every tribe and family all over the country, who made it their home, so that while the rest of the country was quiet, Ibadan was making history.

(Johnson, 192:293)

The appeal to providence is most arresting in a passage describing how the Oyo gained the upper hand over the Ifes, Egbas, and Ijebus among the early settlers of Ibadan. ‘Violence, oppression, robbery, man-stealing were the order of the day’, writes Johnson unflinchingly:

Yet they were destined by God to play a most important part in the history of the Yorubas, to break the Fulani yoke and save the rest of
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the country from foreign domination; in short to be a protector as well as a scourge in the land . . .

(ibid.: 246)

In this checking the Fulani Muslims, Ibadan served not only a Yoruba ethnic interest but, by implication, a Christian interest. Fifty pages later, referring to the establishment of the CMS mission at Abeokuta, Johnson openly contrasts Islam and Christianity in relation to Yoruba interest and destiny:

Thus light began to dawn on the Yoruba country from the south, when there was nothing but darkness, idolatry, superstition, blood shedding and slave-hunting all over the rest of the country. There was an old tradition in the country of a prophecy that as ruin and desolation spread from the interior to the coast (a reference to the Fulani jihad) so light and restoration will be from the coast interiorwards.

(ibid.: 295)

What we need to note here is not so much the ancient prophecy fulfilled, but the project declared. The images of light (imọle) and restoration (aunṣe) are an unmistakable anticipation of Yoruba cultural politics as they would be in the twentieth century. The self-image of the UPN, the Yoruba-based party in the 1979 election — its Yoruba name, from its symbol, was Egbes Imọle: the party of light — reproduces it exactly. Can it be entirely an accident that there, too, the chief opponent was a norther-based power, the NPN under a Fulani/Hausa leader, Alhaji Shettu Shagari?

Yet despite the ingenuity of this cultural argument, the reality of Ibadan’s relations with Christianity and the new pan-Yoruba patriotism urged by the missions was less straightforward. The Ibadan chiefs did not see their opposition to the Fulani Emir of Ilorin in religious terms. Islam was well established in Ibadan by 1851 and Ibadan was to become a predominantly Muslim community. As for a wider Yoruba sense of identity, Ibadan’s influence was felt in two ways. One on the hand, as the largest and most powerful town in the Yoruba country, Ibadan was a major source of cultural homogenization within the region. On the other hand, peace was only possible when Ibadan was decisively stalemated by an alliance of all the other major Yoruba states against her. For all that Johnson was one of the principal peace negotiators, he simply cannot conceal his admiration for Ibadan as a military power: ‘Thus stood the Ibadan lion at bay, yet flinching none, at Ofa [vs. Ilorin], at Kiriji [vs. Ilesha and Ekiti] at Modakeke [vs. Ije and against the Fgbas and the Ijons at home’ (ibid.: 478).

Pan-Yoruba solidarity was thus, to an extent, founded against Ibadan.

The impact of Johnson’s History was delayed, since though completed in 1899 it was not published till 1921. The lateness of the first two decades of colonial rule did not stop a slow diffusion of the new pan-Yoruba identity. Non-Oyo laymen began routinely to treat the whole region as generically Yoruba, an ethno-geographic unit.21 From 1923 there was published in Ibadan The Yoruba News, a weekly newspaper that drew support from non-Oyo as well as Oyo towns. Yoruba ethnic identity, especially among non-Oyo peoples, also evolved in critical reaction to Johnson’s History. Appearing as it did in the 1920s, when today’s rivalry of communities for public-development goods began to take shape, it stimulated rival anti-Oyo accounts.22 None of these was on anything like the scale of Johnson. Such histories of particular towns, as likely in Yoruba as English, most of them produced as pamphlets on shuddy local presses, have continued to be produced — now probably in some dozens. A paradox of this movement in the 1920s is to be especially noted: it was precisely as non-Oyo groups, or rather their educated elements, came to adopt an erstwhile designation of the Oyo, ‘Yoruba’, that anti-Oyo versions of Yoruba history became essential.

One consequence of this wave of communal and subgroup assertion against Johnson and the Oyo was the elevation of Ife in the definition of Yoruba identity. In one sense there was nothing new about this, since even Johnson accepted Ije as the source of the Oyo dynasty. But where Johnson had striven to represent the Oyo kingdom as the privileged heir of Oodudua’s Ife, the historians of other communities made cases for equal descent of their dynasties from Ife. The historical elevation of Ife may have been made easier by the fact that, from the 1840s to the 1890s, the contemporary Ife had been mostly deserted, its site overshadowed by refugee Oyos at nearby Modakeke and for long periods its king in exile. From the 1880s, in Christian circles, Ife was being spoken of as a spiritual (and so ultimately superior) power, in contrast to the secular power of Oyo, almues à la Dumezil. A remarkable document, that seems to express a closely cognate outlook, appeared in the Nigerian Chronicle in April 1916, under the pseudonym ‘Adesola’. Purporting to be an ancient Yoruba religious hymn, it takes the form of an extended divination verse, and was evidently received from a babalawo (diviner). It depicts a mystical time when ‘the land of Ife’ was desolate, and when all the kings of the country came together to find a means to its restoration — which, by finding the spiritual ‘healing leaf’, they succeed in doing. It is significant equally that nearly all the named kings are from communities in the non-Oyo parts of Yorubaland, to the east and south; and that ‘Adesola’ should be revealed as yet another clergyman, the Reverend E.T. Johnson.23

The Christianity of the main promoters of Yoruba identity was now coming to have a further significance. The two world religions, rapidly expanding by the 1920s, spread regionally in a most uneven way (Peel, 1967). Islam came to predominate to the north and west, in the lands of the old Oyo Empire and in towns flooded with Oyo refugees on its
southern fringe (Ibadan, Iwo, Oshogbo, etc.). The east, never under Oyo rule, from north to south, came to be largely Christian. The south to west (Ijebu, Egba, Egbado) was more mixed. The crucial point: Islam, because of its establishment in Oyo as far back as the eighteenth century, spread, after Oyo’s collapse, in precisely those areas whence came the Oyo and Egba ex-slaves who were the spearhead of Christianity and ‘Yoruba’ (quandam Oyo) identity. Christianity, however, won its greatest successes in areas where Islam had no head-start, which were, by the same token, the non-Oyo areas where Yoruba identity only penetrated with Christianity.

Yoruba ethnicity now began to reveal a definite ‘fault line’. It can readily be set out in structural terms, as a set of paired opposites:

- Oyo: Ile
- savannah: forest
- North-western dialects: South-eastern/central dialects
- Yoruba Proper: ‘adopted’ Yoruba
- Muslims: Christians
- NCNC/NNDP/NPN: Action Group/UPN

The top three links of the two vertical or syntagmatic chains are most firmly established. Savannah and forest communities did consciously recognize themselves as such, and recognized dialect differences that correlated with it. Then, as the Yoruba-speaking peoples underwent incorporation into a single state, the scheme revealed a potential for the organization of political competition. The links are looser, because only emergent, between the two bottom pairs of the series; dominant world religion and party allegiance. But there is still a definite process by which entirely new categories, as they emerge from the vicissitudes of historical experience, are ‘syntagmatically’ related to existing ones.

As I have remarked, the world religions spread unevenly in Yorubaland, and that in a way that correlated markedly with the savannah/forest, Oyo/non-Oyo divide. In nearly all communities there are Muslims and Christians; and in predominately Muslim communities, like Iwo or Ogbomoso, Christians have tended to provide much of the modern political leadership. The accepted view – lately expressed in length in Laitin’s Hegemony and Culture (1986, esp. Chapter 6) – is that confessional identity has not been politically relevant among the Yoruba. Certainly, in the first period of party politics (1951–66) there was very little Christian/Muslim about the AG/NCNC split. Yet there was a distinctly Christian undertow to the AG’s message. It was not just that: Christians bulked so large in the party’s leadership, but that its programme was so clearly a continuation of the Christian enterprise of Yoruba ethnicity. Consider the symbolism of its most prestigious project – the Western Region’s own University at (of course) Ile: the Okun head (ancient Ife culture), the open book (godliness and good learning), the blaze of light (ọfọja).

The main exception to all this had to occur at the very centre of the modern Yoruba world, the seat of the AG government of the Western Region, predominantly Muslim Ibadan. In modern politics, the early leadership of Ibadan had come from the small Christian elite, founders of the Ibadan Progressive Union, who naturally gave their support to the Action Group in the early 1950s (Post and Jenkins, 1973). But they were soon eclipsed by a local party called Mabola (‘Don’t spoil the honour of the town’), led by a Muslim, A. Adelabu, who appealed strongly to the sentiments of indigenous Ibadans as ordinary folk (mekunnu) and as Muslims. As their religious appeal was thus linked to class on one side, it was linked to class and community on another. The most prominent of the Yoruba immigrants to Ibadan were the Ijebu – many of them very prosperous, especially the many Christians among them, and their interest in acquiring urban land rights brought them into sharp conflict with Ibadan indigenes. Since the leader of the Action Group, Chief Awolowo, was

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**Figure 13.1:**

Election poster of UPN (1979). The Yoruba text reads: This is the voting symbol of the UPN Party (Party of Light) – Awolowo’s Party – which will appear in the polling stations and on the ballot papers.
himself an Ijebu Christian, the religious, communal, and political ‘codings’ of the conflict all coincided nicely.

For pragmatic reasons, Adelabu’s Mabolaie allied itself with the ‘Igbo’ NCNC, as the AG’s chief rival throughout the region. Later, Adelabu’s thoughts turned to a northern alliance, and he espoused the idea of a separate Central Yoruba State, where Muslims would predominate and provide a wider base for him. Though Adelabu died in 1958, a new anti-AG party, the NNND, did make this alliance (1964–6). Though NNND, and its successor in 1967–8, NPN, won much less Yoruba support than their NCNC predecessor had done, this support was more concentrated in the predominantly Muslim, Oyo-Yoruba area, from Ibadan through Osun-Oshogbo up to Ilorn. UPN spoke for the Yoruba, certainly, but especially for Yoruba Christians. The religious factor was especially manifest in Kwara State, mainly Yoruba but partly of the old Northern Region: the western area around the Ilorin Emirate was for NPN, while the eastern area (Christian Igbo and Igbo) was for UPN.

It is fair as far as it goes to speak with Laitin (1980:xi) of the relative ‘non-politicization of religious differentiation’ among the Yoruba. But it is also superficial if we are led to ignore the more discreet, implicit, or potential influences of religion. Here, as elsewhere, the world religions may both create their own interests, or (as is our chief concern here) they may shape or at least accommodate ethnic interests. So much Cohen clearly saw in relation to Islam and Ibadan Hausa. But his presentism and his inclination to reduce culture to structure prevented him from giving the historical account that is needed to explain it. Two things give the Yoruba situation its remarkable dynamism. First, at no level is community fixed or monolithic. Second, the spread of the world religions has been such that they are both significantly present in most communities and also, to a fair degree, regionally concentrated. The impact of both Muslims and Christians to gloss communal identity in religious terms or to promote their religion as a communal good is thus powerfully restrained by the religious pluralism of their communities.

My account has focused on the role of the Christian missions in promoting Yoruba ethnicity to serve their purposes. They did so by ‘expanding’ an existing ethnic group (the Oyo), whose own historical destiny has proved to embrace much more of their Islamic rivals. The Yoruba Christian intelligentsia has been remarkably successful, securing them in the pattern of Yoruba history. This historic concern of Yoruba Christians to authenticate themselves as Yoruba stands in sharp contrast to the preoccupation of today’s Yoruba Muslims, to authenticate themselves as Muslims (Abubakre, 1980). Culturally, they still look over their shoulders to the Hausa and beyond them to the Middle East. Every hajj is a small pressure towards an Islamic politics, now more evident, even among the tolerant Yoruba, than ever before. If the story of Yoruba ethnicity has hitherto largely been one of Christian endeavour, the pressing question now may well be how Yoruba Muslims square off their two identities.

A final theoretical comment. I suspect that the way I have approached the topic – as a story of Yoruba ethnogenesis – is not quite what the conference organizers may have had in mind. Their call was for ‘an ethnography of history: a study of how the past is used, lived, and recounted, in the construction and in the life of categories of ethnic identification and self-identification in the present’ (my italics). But is this notion of ‘the present’ as a distinct object of study, and the distinctive focus of anthropology at all? Really viable at all? The present has often been treated by anthropologists as a sort of temporal plateau, coterminous with the duration of their fieldwork, inhabited by structures and categories; but it is much more evanescent than that, no sooner come than gone, really no more than the hinge between the past and future. As the other Samuel Johnson put it in Rasselas (Johnson, 1976 (1739):104), ‘it is true that, to the mind is much employed upon the present: recollection and anticipation fill up almost all our moments’. Whether or not this is absolutely true, it does seem to apply rather strongly in the case of those ‘people who seem to make up the rules as they go along’, as Sahlin put it, ‘like the Eskimo, the Tswana, Pul Eliya, or the so-called loosely structured societies of New Guinea’ (Sahlin, 1985:26–7) or, we might add, the Yoruba. Their truest ethnography may well be history. That is why we students of the Yoruba do well to start with the Reverend Samuel Johnson.

Notes

1 On the spread of Tijaniyya among the Hausa generally, see Paden, 1973.
2 The crucial point, drawn from Erikson, is the notion of identity as the condition and product of personal development, of the linking of past, present, and future.
3 Note the quotation from Weber that Smith (1981) uses as a foreword: ‘The reason for the Abstainees not feeling themselves as belonging to the German nation has to be sought in their memories’.
4 For a fuller argument about the relations of community, party, and administrative unit see Pool, 1983:221–3.
5 Gbe is strictly a neologism – the word gbe means ‘language’ – but I adopt this name for a group of languages with high mutual intelligibility, following Capo, 1983.
6 In Cuba they were known as Lucumi (Montejo, 1970:26–8). In Brazil they were mostly known by the names of subgroups, but in some areas Nago (the name of a sixth western subgroup) was used in a wider, generic sense (Busididi, 1978:193,197,205).
7 On the Aku in Sierra Leone see Fyfe, 1962, Peterson, 1969. As Christian Aku became assimilated to the Christian Creole (Krio) population, the name Aku shifted to its present reference as Freetown Muslims of Yoruba descent (who now speak Krio).
8 For example, H. Clapperton, Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior
of Africa (London, 1829); R. Lander, Record of Capt. Clapperton’s Last Expedition to Africa (London, 1830); R. and J. Lander, Journal of an Exploration to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger (London, 1832).

9. J. Johnson, Report to CMS Secretary, 30 Jan. 1878, in CA2/056 (This and subsequent references, are to the CMS Yoruba Mission papers, now in Birmingham: University Library.)


11. The following account is much indebted to Ajayi, 1965; Ayande, 1966; 1970; Ajayi and Smith, 1964.


17. S. Johnson quoting an Ibadan man, Journal Extracts for 5 Apr. 1876, CA2/058.

18. Wole Soyinka gives a delightful account of this ambience, albeit from a much later period in his autobiography (1982). He grew up in a church compound in Ijebu, his mother’s mother and his schoolteacher father Ijebu.

19. On Johnson’s early life, see Doortmont, 1985. Mr Doortmont, of the Erasmus University, Rotterdam, is working on a doctoral dissertation on Samuel Johnson.

20. For example, Johnson 1921:8–9, and the remarkable discussion with a diviner who expresses his own cosmological vision recorded in his journal for 29 Feb. 1875.

21. For example, the six Yoruba laymen who wrote the ‘Report on the Yoruba 1910’, commissioned by the colonial government. They included Egbe and Ijesha as well as Oyo. See Hopkins, 1969.


23. A Methodist, no relation of Samuel or James Johnson. He is also concerned to argue that the poem shows that ancient Yoruba religion was monotheist. The towns mentioned include Ade, Oye, Ide, Ife, Ilesha, Ara, Ijero, Ondo—only Ketu from the north-western area. The essay appears in an appendix to Farrow, 1926.

24. For example, in the case of Ilesha (a forest community), see Pecl, 1983:29.


References


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