
THE ALAKE OF EGBALAND (1)
AN INSIGHT INTO THE HISTORY AND
TRADITIONS OF THE EGBAS

By

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Introduction :

Resounding blows and beats of a rhythm most similar to that of the mystical sect of « Refa'eya » in Egypt or that of the followers of Dalai Lama I happened to see at Oxford Street in London, with an echo in the background, drew our attention while on a visit to the Alake. We were then under the « Olumo Rock ».

Enquiring about this fantastic incident we could know that it was a group of people who came to greet their elder relatives, as it was the habit on that occasion.

Some of us were fascinated by the atmosphere and tried to get to the top of the rock through zigzag ways, a risk similar to climbing the Pyramid of Cheops in Giza. Since it was the second time for me to come to the place, I was not very much attracted by the muscular part of the scene, instead, being interested in history, I was

(1) King of Egbaland, a part of Yoruba country in West Nigeria See Solanke, L. : A special Lecture addressed to A. K. Aji-safe. p. 38 for detailed definition of the word « ALAKE ».

all the time reflecting and trying to trace back the origins of these tales which at least must be branded as « fantabulous » (2).

In my first visit to the place, the guide introduced me to a mess where a priest was addressing a group of house wives, advising them about the ideals of conducting their little estates. Equally in the last visit, I met a lady priest who came for a similar duty. All this motivated my desire for historical knowledge and revived my memory. I tried to find interpretation, judging from past experience about peoples I visited, met and talked to in other areas, in previously British or French territories in West and East Africa.

Waiting for the return of the Alake from a church service in downtown in Abeokuta, we were lucky to have the opportunity to look into the old « Afin Alake » (the palace of the king) then proceeded to the new and most updating and luxurious palace (3) centrally conditioned, almost ready for his majesty's dwelling, short of trivial final touches.

At last the car of the Alake pulled up near to us, the body — guard, a police deputy — superintendent descended and opened the door of the car for the Alake, flanked by « Iyalode and Iyaloja of Egba ». The royal family got into the palace, the Alake himself having taken to the throne, we were introduced to him, had a brief chat and some drinks then granted us some handouts usually distributed on the occasion at the end of the audience. These and some other books I collected from bookshops in Abeokuta, Ife, Ibadan and Lagos were the main sources of this paper, inspired by

(2) A Composite word (fantastic and fabulous) introduced by the Nigerians and later accepted by the British and included into their dictionaries.

(3) A fund was raised for the new palace at an estimated cost of over 12 million Naira (Naira equals \$ 1.4 at that time).

this memorial visit. This paper is in fact, an attempt to trace back and have an insight into the history and traditions of the Egbas and their kings and chiefs.

History of the Egbas :

The origin of the Yoruba nation is involved in obscurity. Like the early history of some African nations, the commonly received accounts are for the most part purely legendary. The people being unlettered, and the language unwritten, all that is known is from traditions carefully handed down. Bards and drummers in some cases serve as « national historians », it is on them, modern historians depend as far as possible, for reliable information they now possess. As may be expected their accounts often vary in several important particulars (4).

I clearly remember that occasion when an African leader said, when he was asked about his date of birth, that he didn't know of sure about it but he could only remember that his mother related the date to an incident that took place in the village.

As to the history of the Yorubas we have in fact two main stories about their origin, one relating it to the Nile Valley, the other to Mecca. As of the first, they said, the ancestral home of the Yorubas was in the Nile Valley, somewhere, close to the ancient Egyptian civilisation. As a result of series of strange historical events which usually uproot people from their homeland and set them on a quest for new habitation, the people left the Nile Valley over a thousand years ago in waves of migration. The word « waves » is used with caution because they did not all come in one band. They journeyed south and then southwest passing through southern Sudan, Bornu, the Plateau region and crossing the River Niger. It is believed that the first wave to arrive settled at Ile-Ife,

(4) Johnson, S. : The history of the Yorubas, p. 3.

and subsequent waves, which were probably at distant intervals, settled in the surrounding areas — Ekiti, Ondo, Ijebu, Egba, Oyo, etc. (5)

As of the second, they said, Yorubas have sprung from Lamurudu one of the kings of Mecca whose offspring were : Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yorubas, the kings of gogobiri and of the kuka-wa, two tribes in the Hausa country — it is worthy of remark that these two nations, notwithstanding the lapse of time since their separation and in spite of the distance from each other of their respective localities, still have the same distinctive tribal marks on their faces, and Yoruba travellers are free amongst them and vice versa, each recognising each other as of one blood. (6)

On line of this story the famous traveller Capt. Clapperton in his «Travels and Discoveries in Northern and central Africa 1822-1824) mentioned a similar origin of the Yorubas with a slight difference as to the name he gave to them i.e.. — Yarba — He said, «Yarba is an extensive province containing rivers, forests, sands and mountains .. the inhabitants of this province, it is supposed, originated from the remnant of the children of Canaan, who were of the tribe of Nimrod. The cause of their establishment in the West of Africa was in consequence of their being driven by Yar — rooba, son of Kahtan, out of Arabia to the Western coast between Egypt and Abyssinia — from that spot they advanced into the interior of Africa, till they reached Yarba where they fixed their residence. On their way they left in every place they stopped at, a tribe of their own people (7).

(5) Onabamiro, Sanya : Glimpses into Nigerian History, p. 36.

(6) Johnson, S. : Op. Cit., p. 3.

(7) Johnson, S. : Ibid., p. 5.

If tradition, bards and stories received from ancestors are the main sources of history for the Yorubas, certainly this is not the case with the Egyptians or the Arabs. In the latter's case, history of thousands of years before the advent of Christ, is firmly documented on monuments ; by Moslem historians and European travellers for later periods. So both stories about the origin of the Yorubas cannot be accepted.

Certainly, the Yorubas are not of Arab origin, and could not have come from Mecca whose history is universally known and no such accounts have been found in the records of Arab writers. I think the confusion came from the fact that many Africans, especially the Moslems, regard the east as Mecca, and Mecca as the east. But in all cases, there is no doubt, in my opinion that the Yorubas are culturally influenced by the east as will be manifested later in discussion of their manners and customs. I think also that Yoruba names and many other words bear witness to this effect.

The Egba tribe, being one of the five tribes forming the Yoruba people and named after the areas in which they settled, as mentioned earlier, consists of four clans : the Ebga Alake, Oka, Ona, Egba, Agura, and Owu ; their chiefs are respectively named, the Alake, Oshile, Agura and Olown. At first, each clan inhabited a distinct part of the country, but during the intertribal wars in the middle of last century especially the wars with the Dahomeyans, these clans were driven in on the centre of the country and there they founded Abeokuta (8).

The boundaries of Egba were defined according to agreement entered into between governor of the colony of Lagos, and the king and authorities of Egba Nation residing at Abeokuta, signed at

(8) Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the disturbances in Egba Division, P. 1.

Abeokuta the 18th of January 1893. According to the first article of the mentioned agreement in the chapter on « Egba (Boundaries) »: the line of demarcation between the two countries shall commence on the eastward at the town of Orisi on the left bank of the River Ogun, which shall be considered as falling within the Lagos sphere of influence, the boundary line shall then cross the river at right angles, and take the most direct established road to the town of Ota, which as at present shall be considered as under Egba jurisdiction. From Ota the boundary line shall follow the main road leading through Ilogo, Alogboro and Epoto to Ilaro. (9)

In Abeokuta the four clans are represented, and each one has its distinct quarter and each quarter was divided into a number of townships each under its own chiefs. Each township corresponded to a village or group of villages in the country. This division of Abeokuta has persisted up to the present and not merely are the own and other quarters distinct from each other, but the separate townships within the quarter are also distinct. Of the four clans the Egba Alake was considerably the largest tribe ; the Alake was in consequence the senior of the four Head Chiefs but he was by no means the paramount chief according to the original constitution of the country. He was merely « Primus inter pares » (10). (the first among equals).

Igbas movement to Abeokuta was, in fact, the out — come of inter — tribal wars that raged like wild fire in all parts of Yoruba land, thereby forcing different ethnic groups to flee from their homestead. The Egbas being affected, sent emissaries to Abeokuta, where the Egbas are today. When they reached Abeokuta, they found it a virgin forest where they discovered the Olumo Rock and found it most suitable as a hiding place from the invading enemies.

(9) Johnson, S. Op. Cit., pp. 656, 657.

(10) Report of the commission of Enquiry, p. 2.

by virtue of cave which provided shelters. After the return of the emissaires, movement to Abeokuta started gradually and people increased in numbers, that was 1830 the year of first settlement in Abeokuta, meaning under the rock, since it provided accomodation. (11)

The Olumo Rock is sacred in Abeokuta history, as the place where the first settlers found refuge from their attackers. The importance of Olumo Rock to the Egbas is conveyed in the saying that « Abeokuta was the gift of the Olumo as Egypt was the gift of the Nile ». This is said to agree with the predictions of the Ifa Oracle which, when consulted, had assured the Egbas that they would become a great nation under Olumo's protection. On their arrival they found in it, evidence of the fulfilment of that prediction. Today the Egbas demonstrate their pride in their origin by signing annually in its honour a special anthem captioned «I shall Rejoice On The Olumo Rock ». (12)

When circumstances allowed, the people spread out from Abeokuta to farm the land from which they had been driven, but and this is a very important fact in the history of Abeokuta, neither the principal Chiefs nor the Township Chiefs followed them, they all remained in Abeokuta. The whole township life of the Egbas was thus concentrated in Abeokuta : the rest of the country was merely the farm land and it is noteworthy that up to today the common native expression for Egbalan is « Abeokuta town and farm ». Had

(11) The tenth coronation Anniversary, 1972-1982, p. 1.

(12) The tenth coronation Anniversary of the accession of Oba, p. 23.

the chiefs followed their people into the villages there could not have been the same cohesion for defence and the country might have been attacked and conquered piecemeal ; in addition internal jealousies and dissensions would have arisen and weakened the clans and so made them an easy prey to their powerful neighbours. In course of time there was a certain intermixture of the clans in the villages and Egba Alake villages for instance are found amongst the OWU and other villages but so far this has not destroyed the custom whereby each of the four clans is regarded as dominant in one of the quarters into which the country is roughly divided (13).

Placed inside the rock and worshiped annually by women is the « Orisi Igun ». The celebration lasts thirty days during which goats, rams, etc. are sacrificed. There is also the regularly performed traditional ceremonies marking the commencement of Yam harvesting season at the rock site. The Olumo Rock features so prominently in the national life of the Egbas that no program of any national celebration is ever regarded as complete without being preceded by the booming of guns by the traditional hunters from the top of Olumo Rock. Those who believe that Olumo can change their lives for the better go privately to make sacrifices to the deity.

Many tales of mystery have been told about events that took place in the vicinity of the Rock. It was once said that when an attempt was made to blast the Rock, pus and blood gushed out,

(13) Report of the Commission of Enquiry, p. 2.

and the spot was quickly sealed up (14).

Traditions :

Since the Yorubas were subjected to the British rule in Nigeria and their extension in the state of Benin (formerly Dahomé) was subjected to the French, the impact of cultural exchange was felt especially in the areas around the boundaries from both sides. I felt this effect on my visit to Badagry Beach where people were able to communicate either in Yoruba language or English and French. The indigenous language remained the language of non — literate masses, nevertheless, I could easily communicate in English with Yorubas in Western Nigeria with anybody whatever his standard of education might have been. English is the «Lingua franca» for Nigerians who speak different national languages, it is for them a second language. As for the the illiterate speak what they call broken English, a kind of jargon not easily understood by foreigners. It took me some weeks to get allowed to it, especially that they have a horrible accent due to the interference of their source languages. It is more difficult than other standards of English spoken in India, East or South Africa. In my opinion it comes second only to Sierra Leonese English.

Since the Yorubas have no knowledge of letters their learning consists chiefly in oral traditions. The historians are the king's cymballists and ballad singers the chief of whom is called the Ologbo or Arokin. They chant to the king the story of the nation, and

(14) The tenth coronation Anniversary of the accession of Oba, pp. 23, 24.

history of former reigns, for his information and instruction. They are kept in the royal service and are well supported. The office is hereditary. They have their tradition about the creation. It is their belief that at the creation men fed on wood and water, that they had a long projecting mouth ; that the bat was originally a creature in human form, and was a blacksmith by trade, and that with his instrument he reduced men's mouths to their present shape, for which cause he was condemned to lose the human form and to assume that of a beast, and to use one and the same mouth for receiving food as well as for evacuation. The allegation that water was the original food of man is supported by the fact that it is the first thing taken by a new — born babe, as well as the last thing taken at a man's dying moments (15).

Ever since, a lot of water has passed under the Lafenwa Bridge, as the Yorubas say. The various constitutional changes in the Egba country, brought in its wake sweeping social changes in the country. Before the early 1950's the Egba Native Administration in furtherance of its educational policy which was designed to equip Egba sons and daughters with the basic tools of modern competition, provided scholarships and bursaries for numerous deserving Egba sons and daughters. Primary education became free in 1956. Various communities and religious societies supplemented the efforts of the state government by the building and running of several educational institutions through communal efforts. In 1976 however, the Ogun State government took over the management and

(15) Johnson, S. : Op. Cit., pp. 125-126.

running of all post — primary institutions in the State (16).

Concurrent with the changes in education were modifications in the social institutions. First to be affected was the extended family which was characterised by common traditions of origin. They practiced marriage within one's home region, which also made for the stability of traditional marriage and purity of the culture. This was rendered obsolete in the face of transportation systems which opened new avenues for local spinisters and bachelors to pick their spouses from outside their home regions. Additionally the changes for greater mobility reduced the effectiveness of pre-European parental control and sanctions on the Youth (17).

In the past, the Egbas were mostly monogamic, out of necessity ; for although polygamy was not actually forbidden, yet only rich folk could avail themselves of indulgence in that condition of life. Besides in a community mainly pastoral and agricultural, where all were peaceful, and no one engaged in any occupation perilous to the lives of its male population e.g. warfare, sea - faring, deep mining, etc. where wants were few and easily satisfied, the young men married as soon as they were of an age to support a family, and therefore a superfluous female population was hardly ever known. Marriage laws and customs, as many other disciplines, have undergone changes brought about by intercourse with other peoples (18).

(16) Message delivered by Alake of Egbaland, p. 6.

(17) Asiwaju, A.I. : Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889-1945.

(18) Johnson, S. : Op. Cit., p. 113.

My knowledge is that mixed marriages between adherents to different religions and denominations are not uncommon. I know of a friend who told me that her mother was moslem but converted to christianity after marrying her father, then she chose to go back to her previous religion and seperated from her father. She said that she herself married a moslem and therefore she is a moslem too. I could notice that she was not serious about choosing either religion.

The woman in the Egba society is a great help to the husband. I heard about a wife who took the responsibility of raising the family, her husband having been dismissed from his job and lying prostrate in the house due to severe illness. This noble wife resorted to borrowing money since her income was not sufficient, but unfortunately, unable to continue, she chose to commit suicide, preferring to give the little kids a chance for being taken care of by a benevolent.

Women work in different fields of activity, the older ones seed cotton and spin thread, shell the kernels from the palm nuts, and also tend poultry, goats and sheep for the market. Dying is done by women who prepare indigo balls for the market. They are equally engaged with men in trading and weaving. Palm oil making and nut oil making from the kernels of the palm nuts, as well as shea butter from the shea fruit are exclusively female industries. Also they manufacture beads from the hard shells of palm nuts, in addition to pottery and hair dressing (19).

(19) Johnson, S. . Op. Cit., pp. 123-125.

Some Egbas practise medicine, they use substances for treating or preventing disease or illness. Thus the professional skill of a medicine man includes curing, alleviating and preventing disease as well as restoring and preserving health. In many cases he is a diviner, a priest as well as a manufacturer of charms. Religion and magic are so closely connected that it is difficult to say when one passes from one realm to another. The offices of a priest and of the magician are sometimes held by one man (20).

Magic and witchcraft are real problems according to traditions which some well — educated people believe in them to the extent that they form secret societies and practise what they call «Jojo» (21). A friend told me that some children were kidnapped and thrown in deep ditches where snakes bite them fatally to death, the body is cut in small pieces to be used as «Jojo».

Due to Yoruba belief in communion between the living and the dead, the ideal final resting place for a man was his lineage house. Traditional Yoruba burial took place inside the house. According to old customs they did not bury their dead in graveyards or cemeteries. Infants, however are not buried in the house, but their dead bodies are either thrown away into the nearest bush or forest, or are partially buried with a bit of earth sprinkled over them, and are thus left a prey to jackals prowling by night (22). I saw

(20) Awolalu J.O. : Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites, pp. 74-79.

(21) A Yoruba word meaning « magic ».

(22) Johnson, S. : Op. Cit., p. 137.

this practice when we were crossing the forest around Ibadan. I saw a dead body of a boy around twelve years of age lying by the road side, some parts of his limbs snatched and the whole body rotten. Amazingly I made a point of protest to a Nigerian friend who was accompanying me in the car. He did not respond, so I could not bring the argument any further.

Although the old practice was never abandoned, the gradual rise in the number of converts to christianity and Islam resulted in the creation of new cemeteries and the expansion of existing ones. Today public burial grounds have become a common feature (23).

It is the custom for every Egbà now unless he be a pauper or a small child — to be brought to Abeokuta for burial in the township to which he or she belongs (24).

In case of the death of the Alake, many problems lie ahead. This was brought to discussion at an early time in 1924 during the British administration. The British resident called for a meeting under his chairmanship with Alake and other tribal chiefs of the Egbaland attending. They ruled that if an Alake dies the Egbas select a chief of a general title or a senior Ogboni chief to act as regent to do all that they have to do in the Alake palace up till the time they will have new Alake. They also decided to build a Mausoleum at Ake palace Square for the purpose of burying the corpses of the Alakes. The practice is also observed when the Alake is out of the country as in 1904 when he went to England, the Seriki of the Egbas,

(23) Asiwaju, A.I. : Op.Cit., p: 224.

(24) Report of the commission of enquiry, p. 2.

late Ali, was appointed to act as regent during his absence (25). In this way they deem their native customs quite valid and useful in preserving stability either during the absence of the Alake or during the interregnum.

The native traditions still have their impact on both moslems and christians, large numbers of them are among the active participants of pagant practices. They participate in the traditional festivals and the sacrifices involved. It is rare to find the adherents of the traditional religion running to the christian or moslem leaders seeking spiritual aid. They do not campaign for membership and they have no written literature to guide their adherents ; yet many christians and muslims revert to them in moments of need without feeling any sense of inconsistency (26).

They believe in an Almighty God, they term Olorun, i.e., Lord of Heaven, but they consider him too exalted to concern Himself directly with men and their affairs, hence they admit the existence of many Gods as intermediaries, and these they term Orisas. They believe in future state, hence the worship of the dead, and invocation of spirits as observed in the Egugun festival, a festival in which masked individuals personate dead relatives. They also believe in transmigration of souls, they say deceased parents are born again into the family of their surviving children. For this reason some children are named « Babatunde », i.e., father comes again, and « Ye tude », i.e. mother comes again (27).

(25) Interregnum and burial of the Alakes, pp. 5-6.

(26) Awolalu, J.O. : Op. Cit., p. 195.

(27) Johnson, S. : Op. Cit., p. 26.

Concessions to other religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, placed further limitations on the scope of operation of these cults. Night meetings and drumming, which were vital practices of Ifa and Ogun worshippers, also suffered strictures. Offences against these anti — religious regulations were stringently punished (28).

Islam and Christianity, together with Western education, are imposed on the traditional religion, and the adherents find it difficult, if not impossible, to dissociate themselves from the traditional practices into which they were born, hence they revert to them from time to time. They maintain a divided loyalty to both the traditional religion and the new religion to which they have been converted. Thus it is a common thing to find some Christian Yoruba who have one foot in the Christian religion and the other foot in the traditional religion. Such Christians swing to one faith or the other as circumstances dictate. The same thing goes for moslems. What is uppermost in the mind of a Yoruba man is to have life — that is, to have peace, happiness, good health, prosperity and longevity and he is ready to utilise whatever means by which such good things are available.

It is not unusual to find a christian Yoruba seeking spiritual aid from an Imam or to find a moslem seeking aid from the Aladuura (a Christian prayer group) (28).

I watched at Bar Beach in Lagos the followers of this self-styled Christian denomination « Aladuura » all dressed in white, men

(28) Asiwaju, A.I. : Op. Cit., p 212

and women, boys and girls flocking together around tents they dug into sands of the beach waiting for Jesus Christ to come out from the sea before dawn. I knew that they were declared a heretic sect.

I could notice this cross — cultural or rather cross — religious confusion with my own eyes. In our way from Lagos to Abeokuta, due to heavy traffic and hold — up, we had to put off the engine of our car, I noticed some Arabic scriptures on a Lorry, these were in fact some verses from Quran, to my astonishment I noticed also some symbols which are particulars of Christian faith. The only explanation for this riddle was simply that the owner of the lorry liked it in that way.

Conclusion :

Religions, creeds, and traditions are interrelated among the Yoruba, you can hardly take any body as true adherent of a certain religion. It is almost impossible to apply orthodox criteria or the tenets of a certain religion on a Yoruba. They do not take these things seriously. Conversion from a religion is not that difficult, it is « no problem », an expression that is quite popular among them. I heard of a high — ranking official who refused to give the oath by swearing with either Quran or the Bible but with his military honour. This official joined a certain sect called « Ja ». Its cults are based on murmurs and nothing else, a kind of pantomime practice. On the state T.V. I watched a preacher calling for Buddhism. A historian, equipped with historical knowledge about peoples, their history and traditions, is the best authority to give judgement not only about the past, though his area of interest is historical reality.

(29) Awolalu, J.O. : Op. Cit., p. 194.

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