

Chapter 5

The roots of Yoruba historiography: classicism, traditionalism and pragmatism

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Introduction

After decennia of self-righteousness on the part of Western historians in their approach to the African past, the 1960s and 1970s have shown a shift towards an anti-eurocentric approach of African history. This shift could take place because of the active participation of African academic historians in the description and analysis of African history. From an affair of observers, African history became an affair of historians that were both observers and actors.² In the 1980s, as a follow-on, a considerable number of articles and books on the subject of African historiography have appeared, all addressing the theoretical aspects of the problem of a non-western approach to African history.³ One cannot but wonder, however, if the drive to expiate the errors of the past on the part of Western Africanists has not caused the scales to tip too far towards an Africa-centric viewpoint.

B. Jewsiewicki is quite right when he remarks that 'the integration of western epistemology conditions African historiography within the network of one or another aspect of the western university system'.⁴ The colonial inheritance was and is in many cases extremely nationalistic towards the former metropolis, not only in the fields of politics and economy, but also in the field of historiography. Indeed, 'our present perceptions of Africa and its past are conditioned by the epistemological categories well established by 1900, and in large part derived from the observations of administrators, missionaries, and various travelers'.⁵ But that, we think, is as far as it goes. To say that 'in the colonial period Europeans represented the African continent either as essentially undifferentiated, the homeland of all that was primitive, or as the irreducible confusion of many tribes, each peculiar in its customs' is a severe oversimplification of reality.⁶

To get a somewhat clearer picture, we want to look at one specific region for which there is an abundance of historical literature from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Yoruba historiography is rather peculiar in the sense that it starts very early, and is from the beginning an affair of both Europeans and Yorubas, or in other words, from both African and Africanist historians.⁷ Although 'most of the Yoruba local histories were written in English or Yoruba in the Roman script and derived their inspiration from European models', as R. Law states, this does not mean that Yoruba historians simply copied European models.⁸ They modified and combined them with traditional models, and used these new models for their own, usually un-European, ends.

Apart from Europeans in the form of explorers, missionaries and officials of the British government, it was Yorubas that looked at and described Yoruba society, admittedly through European glasses, but also with Yoruba eyes. Both the Europeans and the Yorubas that wrote on Yoruba history, moreover, can hardly be accused of displaying an undifferentiated view. The early studies of the European missionaries C. A. Gollmer and J. B. Wood, who wrote their reports on the history and chronology of Lagos in 1853 and 1872 respectively, may have been biased towards the eurocentric, but both are definitely detailed and balanced.⁹ The same can be said of the work of most Yoruba historians dating from that period. This is an aspect that has so far not been fully addressed in the debate on the eurocentric approach to African history and which is of particular importance in the context of Yoruba historiography.

The work of Gollmer and Wood, to stay with this example, was meant as a reportage for the British Government in Lagos. As such, the aim of the authors was not to publish a history for history's sake, but to report on an existing political situation and explain it in historical terms. The parameters within which these studies were written are clear: the source materials consisted of oral traditions collected from knowledgeable Yorubas the authors knew through their missionary work, the methodology was that of nineteenth-century European historiography, narrative and positivist, and the goal was to inform the British government about their newly acquired possessions.¹⁰

In late nineteenth-century Lagos we find the very Victorian colonial community of British administrators and missionaries on the one hand, and Sierra Leonian Yorubas, active in trade and mission and with a definite European outlook, on the other. This mixed society naturally developed a rather composite approach to history. The Yoruba past was looked at through European glasses, defined by education and acculturation, but with a basis in indigenous historical traditions.

In this respect, the development of Yoruba historiography over the last century can be said to rest on three principles: the classical principle, the traditional principle and the pragmatic principle. Over time each of these has had a role of changing importance, but all were and are present all the time in the writings of Yoruba historians. In the remainder of this chapter we will discuss these principles that have influenced Yoruba historiography from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, and that had their roots partly in European traditions of applied scholarship, partly in a comparable Yoruba tradition.

The principle of classicism

Latin and Greek was commenced but not to lose time we went on till 3 o'clock instead of 2 o'clock p.m. My chief reason was to give some of the more intelligent pupils an opportunity to be introduced to the Greek language so as to be able to read the New Testament in the original. (G. F. Bühler, Principal of the Church Missionary Training Institution at Abeokuta, 1857-64)¹¹

When the Anglican Mission came to Yorubaland from Sierra Leone in 1845, it not only brought with it the Gospel of Christianity, but also the gospel of European civilisation, to be spread among the Yorubas. As J. F. A. Ajayi has discussed in his *Christian Missions in Nigeria*, the early activities of missionaries in Nigeria were marked by an ideological controversy centring around the question whether the Gospel should precede civilisation or whether the way to Christianity was to be found in civilisation.¹² In general we can

say that among the early missionaries and educationalists the view was popular that general education and civilisation preceded conversion, and early Yoruba historians like Samuel Johnson, Emmanuel Lijadu, M. T. Euler Ajayi, and M. C. Adeyemi, who received a missionary education in this spirit, show an erudition rooted therein that was unique for this era.¹³

The above-quoted G. F. Bühler is an example of the class of missionaries that put education over proselytisation. Bühler, a CMS missionary of German extraction, ran the CMS Training Institution at Abeokuta between 1857 and 1864 and put the principle of a classical education into practice.¹⁴ Under his direction, quite a number of pupils, among them Samuel Johnson, received not only a theological training but also a very broad general education.¹⁵ In 1863 the curriculum for the English-speaking pupils of the school consisted of an enormous number of courses. To give an idea of the scope of the curriculum we shall give the complete list as it occurs in Bühler's papers for 1863: Old Testament scripture history, exposition of Old and New Testament, catechism, natural philosophy, Biblical natural history, geography (Europe, Africa, Asia and America), general history from the first French Revolution (1789) to the present, missionary intelligence, arithmetic, dictation and English composition, Yoruba composition, playing the harmonium and singing.¹⁶

During other semesters Bühler and his assistant also taught general history up to the thirteenth century, general history of the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman Empires (in connection with scripture history), principles of teaching, orthography, Yoruba—English and English—Yoruba translation, and calligraphy. In 1861 Bühler had furthermore started with lessons in Greek and Latin.

On the whole this curriculum probably mirrored the curriculum of any English school geared towards missionary education. Be it, of course, that the context in which this education was given was completely different from what it could ever be in England.

The Greek lessons mentioned in the quote above were extra, as can be concluded from Bühler's remark on them: 'and occasionally, as time and health allowed me [in 1863, I engaged in] reading the Greek Testament (Gospel of St John) with some of the pupils after tea in the evening', but these lessons were therefore not less important for the intellectual moulding of the pupils that received them.¹⁷ Samuel Johnson, who took part in them, remembered them well when writing his monumental *History*, as he refers repeatedly to Greek antiquity. From the preface onwards Johnson refers to topics in ancient history, linking up and looking for Egyptian, Middle Eastern and Greek aspects in Yoruba mythology, and draws implicit comparisons between Yoruba and ancient history. Because of the northern, Muslim connections, many Yoruba traditions were undoubtedly influenced by myths and tales of Middle Eastern origin, but Johnson goes beyond this.¹⁸ Johnson's education as an historian took place during his years at the Training Institution in the care of Bühler. Apart from teaching his pupils ancient, medieval and modern history, he acquainted them with classical authors like Caesar, Eutropius and Xenophon in his Greek and Latin classes. Especially Xenophon's *Anabasis* must have fascinated Johnson, as we can find several allusions to the Persian—Greek and Greek civil wars in his *History of the Yorubas*.¹⁹

Michael Thomas Euler Ajayi, a methodist missionary in Lagos, did not receive his education in Bühler's Training Institution, but was equally if not more influenced by the classics. His 'General History of the Yoruba Country by a Yoruba Historian', published in episodes in the weekly newspaper *Lagos Standard* in 1905 and 1906, is rife with references to the classics and classical mythology.²⁰ He starts his history with a quotation from Horace, and when he speaks of the origin of the Yoruba, which he dates at c.500 years, Euler Ajayi writes that this must have been 'about AD 1400 when Alfonso V was King of Arragon, when Timur was carrying all before him in the East, and his son Mohammed

II the Conqueror was converting the Great Church of St Sophia in Turkey into a Mohammedan mosque, and Henry V of England was setting out against France at Agincourt'.²¹ The gods of the Yoruba are equated with those of Greek and Roman mythology; Oya becomes Neptune, Shango is Jupiter, the god of thunder, Ifa is equated with Minerva as the god of intelligence and wisdom, and Ogun becomes Mars, the god of war.²² Further on in his work we encounter numerous quotations from the works of Alexander Pope (1688-1744), who seemed to be one of Ajayi's favourite authors.²³

The plan to found an institute of higher education in Lagos in the 1890s under the name of 'Lagos Training College and Industrial Institute' is presented by Ajayi with 'A little learning is a dangerous thing, drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring.'²⁴ The wars between Kosoko and Akintoye in Lagos in the 1850s are captured with the quotation, also from Pope, 'This world 'tis true, was made for Caesar — but for Titus too.'²⁵ Rather more obscure is the quotation Ajayi uses for his description of the cession of Lagos by King Docemo to the British in 1861: 'What can ennoble sots, or slaves or cowards? Alas! Not all the blood of all the Howards.'²⁶

The examples given here could be extended quite easily if we take into account the numerous Yoruba that went to Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, for their education, as M. C. Adeyemi did, or to those who received part of their education in Britain, like Samuel Johnson's brother Obadiah, surgeon and politician in Lagos, and editor of Samuel's *History*.²⁷ The point is that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century Lagos and the Yoruba hinterland counted quite a number of Yoruba with a perception of history that coupled factual knowledge of Yoruba society gained from experience with scholarly knowledge of world history rooted in European educational traditions. For Samuel Johnson it was ancient Greece that issued him with examples for his study of the Old Oyo empire. His eighteenth-century Oyo strongly resembles the Arcadian Greece of Renaissance scholars, and the destruction of this peaceful state through internal strife to him found its forebear in the civil wars of the Greeks as described by Xenophon. Euler Ajayi found inspiration in Pope, who provided him with quotations to explain what he regarded to be dramatic events in Yoruba history. To explain to his 'civilised' Yoruba readers in Lagos the Yoruba pantheon he equated the important Yoruba gods with equivalents from classical mythology, implying that these appealed more to the imagination of the average Lagosian than the indigenous deities.

The principle of traditionalism

With respect to the ancient and mythological period he has stated the facts as they were given by the bards, and with regard to the History of comparatively recent dates, viz., from the time of King Abiodun downwards, from eye-witnesses of the events which they narrate, or from those who have actually taken part in them. He has thus endeavoured to present a reliable record of events. (Samuel Johnson, The History of the Yorubas)

In their study of Yoruba history, the early historians saw themselves confronted by a problem that had no ready-made solution: how to translate oral traditions, the vehicle of historical information, into a form of history that befitted modern times. As we have discussed above, this led to a form of history in which classical European models served to describe the Yoruba past. The source materials, in the form of oral traditions and other

information received from informants, did not exactly fit these models. Nevertheless most Yoruba historians were quite good at moulding sources and methods into a usually rather consistent whole. Samuel Johnson's *History* is of course the classical example here, as has been discussed elsewhere.²⁸ Let us take Johnson as an example here for early Yoruba historiography in general.

In Johnson, as in most other early histories, theoretical reflections on the nature of oral traditions and their significance as an historical source are almost completely absent. Or, as J. D. Y. Peel has put it, the modern historian has to keep in mind that:

*When such evidence [i.e. oral traditions] is all there is, the historian may feel there is nothing to do but to shrug off . . . scepticism, grit his teeth, and soldier on with an account based squarely on traditions, trimming them where modern common sense and various rather general criteria of the historically plausible may dictate.*²⁹

Social anthropological methods of analysis, as successfully employed by S. Feierman in his study on the Shambaa kingdom, to 'assist an interpretation of oral . . . traditions with an apparently historical content' have not been called upon in the case of Yoruba history.³⁰ *The History of the Yorubas* consists of a chronologically arranged historical narrative concerning the dynastic history of Oyo from mythological to modern times, and the political and military history of the early nineteenth century. In it, Johnson offers his readers his interpretation of the traditional version (or versions) of Oyo history. But what is he offering exactly? In the first place, a collection of not very well connected praise-songs, engineered by Johnson into a seemingly coherent epic. At the basis of this epic stands a king-list, which has in turn been copied in one form or another by many later historians, and perhaps even by the official historians of Oyo, as constituting the chronological framework in which Oyo history can be set.

In other words, Johnson follows his sources closely, without too much comment on their historicity, thereby reifying oral tradition, but at the same time giving it the legitimacy of western scholarship. The work of other historians, like M. C. Adeyemi or J. O. George stays even closer to the original sources.³¹ Nevertheless, whatever the manner in which these authors used their sources, the end-result of their work was that Yoruba oral traditions very quickly achieved a new dimension that over time guaranteed their survival as the bedrock of modern Yoruba historiography.

The principle of pragmatism

*The considerations which have inspired the issue of this Handbook are mainly twofold. In the first place, while serving as indispensable Vade Mecum to every member of the Union, it will also serve as a restatement of their views on the political relationship between Oyo and Ibadan. On the other hand, to those who are strangers to the History of Yorubaland . . . this book will satisfy a need. (P. A. Afolabi, Hon. General Secretary, Oyo Progressive Union)*³².

To understand nineteenth-century Yoruba historiography, and, by extension also to understand twentieth-century Yoruba historiography, we have to look at the political climate in the region at the time. In the rather confused political and socio-economic circumstances of nineteenth-century Yorubaland two new elites emerged that were to set the scene of colonial western Nigeria for the remainder of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The old order of the Oyo empire in the north of the country was destroyed and replaced by a number of smaller, rather bellicose states, headed by men

who, in general, had no loyalties towards older power structures. They constituted a first new Yoruba elite. A second elite consisted of the so-called 'educated' Yoruba, mainly migrants from Sierra Leone, who were active in trade and mission, as well as in the colonial administration of Lagos.

In Yorubaland, as in many other parts of Africa, the past was and is an important legitimising source for the existing political and social order, and such changes in the conception of history give us an insight into the way in which the Yoruba collectively perceived the social order they lived in. The new indigenous Yoruba elite used historical traditions to legitimise its newly acquired position; the 'educated' Yoruba elite saw in it a means to develop a cultural identity not directly connected with British colonial rule.

In the period of the Yoruba civil wars, a number of strong military states emerged, led by soldiers without obvious connections with, or loyalties towards, the old power structures. New towns like Ibadan under Oluyole, Ijaye under Kurunmi, New Oyo under Atiba, and Abeokuta under Sodeke all started their existence as war camps or refuges in the civil war period. Due to the needs of the time, also older, long-established states militarised. This is true for the Ijesha in the 1870s, when they were *de facto* ruled by the Balogun or war chief Ogedemgbe,³³ rather than by the Oba or king, and it is also valid for the ancient and sacred city of Ile-Ife under the Ooni-elect Derin, after its destruction by Modakeke. Derin even declined the status of sacred leader due to him in favour of his position as a war leader.³⁴

In effect, as B. Awe has pointed out, 'Ijaye, Abeokuta, Oyo, and Ibadan, the first twenty years after their foundation represented a period of consolidation and evolution of an efficient system of government.'³⁵ And to the list of states can be added Ilorin, which, despite the Fulani influence at top government and social levels, predominantly remained a Yoruba state. So from the middle of the nineteenth century Yorubaland was no longer ruled according to long-established customs, interregional affiliations and complex relationships by the traditional kings and chiefs. In a sense, Yorubaland was ruled by a collection of 'warlords', aggressively carving out a territory and a sphere of influence of their own, regardless of what tradition and custom prescribed.

We now turn to the implications of politics for the way in which history was approached among the new Yoruba rulers. When in the late 1830s the city of Old Oyo was deserted by its inhabitants, it meant the final collapse of what had been a powerful empire. There was no Alaafin in office, and the court and government were dispersed over several towns. In short, anarchy reigned. It was not until Atiba, a distinguished soldier and, according to some versions of tradition, a royal prince of Oyo, took control that matters stabilised a little. Atiba gained control by appealing to the agents of the Old Oyo court on the one hand, and by concluding a pact with the 'warlords' of Ijaye and Ibadan on the other.³⁶ In this set-up the Yoruba-Fulani state of Ilorin provided the ideological binding factor for the new Oyo state: Ilorin was painted as an evil (because Muslim) and alien (because Fulani) force at the doorstep of the 'Yoruba Nation', threatening to overrun and destroy the fledgling state. In this construction Atiba became a saviour figure.

In many documented traditions the controversy between Ilorin and Oyo-Ibadan during the second half of the nineteenth century is highlighted, while in fact, after 1840 Ilorin posed no real military threat to the rest of Yorubaland. Besides, many of the new elite in the south were or had been Muslims themselves, including Atiba. The emphasis on a conflict based on religion is therefore fictitious, rather than rooted in reality. In other words, what we are looking at here is a complex game of power politics, in which tradition, history, was used as an implement to bend the rules of the game. In this respect, a comparative study of the visions of the New Oyo elite and those of the Ilorin elite seems opportune.

By making use of history, by approaching existing traditions pragmatically, Atiba was

able to recreate Oyo at Ago, later to become New Oyo, and to legitimise his position. The traumatic experience of the removal of the old capital was made acceptable by incorporating this event into tradition. The existing story of an earlier transfer of the capital from Igbobo to Old Oyo was adapted in order to mirror more pressing contemporary political purposes.³⁷

In the new system of government, the warlords of Ijaye and Ibadan took up the Old Oyo titles of Basorun (Prime Minister) and Are-Ona-Kakanfo (Commander-in-Chief) respectively, thereby conveniently fitting themselves into and recreating the administrative order of Old Oyo.³⁸ For the outside world the new set-up looked like Old Oyo reborn, be it with modifications; in actual fact all through the 1830s and 1840s Oyo was ruled by a triumvirate of warlords which had no foothold in tradition.

In the 1850s the *ad hoc* agreement between Oyo, Ibadan and Ijaye started to disintegrate. Ibadan now aimed at becoming an independent power in the area, and wanted to get rid of the tripartite system of power-sharing. Oyo did not have the resources to perform an equal military role to Ibadan and Ijaye, and Atiba became a 'ritual', a symbolic head of northern Yorubaland. Ibadan agreed with this set-up and took up the position of 'Defender of the Empire', so to speak. In this role it could expand its territory without going against the newly established tradition. There was, however, now no longer a place for Kurunmi, the leader of Ijaye, who wanted to hold on to the agreement of the 1830s. Eventually this led to the Ibadan-Ijaye war, in which Ijaye was destroyed and the balance of power restored.³⁹

In the developments sketched, historical traditions concerning Old Oyo were effectively incorporated into the socio-political structures of the day. With the strengthening of Oyo's symbolic position terminologies changed quickly. In the mid-1850s Church Missionary Society missionaries in the area were still speaking of Ago-d'Oja or camp of Oja, rather than of (New) Oyo, indicating that the Alaafin had not yet established himself as a nominal overlord over all Oyo-Yoruba. We could surmise that the 1858 quarrel between Oyo and Ijaye was the last phase in a development towards Oyo spiritual hegemony, which was symbolised by the change of name from Ago to Oyo. Together, of course, with a further incorporation of this event in tradition; Oyo had *always* been the overlord over *all* Yoruba peoples.

Discrepancies that arose from this statement were explained away, or glossed over. The printed versions of Oyo tradition lead us to believe that Ago was called Oyo from the moment Atiba made it his capital in the 1830s,⁴⁰ and Ibadan maintained the fiction of Oyo overlordship over all Yoruba. And who, may we ask, was to contradict Ibadan, by far the most powerful city-state in the region in the second half of the nineteenth century? Only when Ibadan itself did no longer find the fiction of Oyo supremacy suitable for its political well-being was Oyo's position challenged. By then the British were the real masters of Yorubaland, however.

A number of questions arise from the picture drawn here. In the first place, we must ask ourselves how historical traditions were guarded and the knowledge of them emanated. In Oyo there exists a group of official 'court historians' or 'Royal bards', as Samuel Johnson calls them, the so-called *Arokin*. Atiba, who as king was formally the guardian of tradition, apparently played an important role here in the sense that he actively manipulated the court historians in order to stamp his version of tradition as genuine.⁴¹

Apart from the example given above, numerous examples are available for the traditions of other Yoruba states. As discussed elsewhere, the mythologies of the nineteenth century were transferred to the twentieth century and used within the colonial administrative framework.⁴² Eventually they would be incorporated in the academic historiography of the twentieth century.⁴³

The pragmatic attitude towards the past displayed by the indigenous political elite of

nineteenth-century Yorubaland was adopted by the Western-educated elite. From the 1840s and 1850s onwards these people developed an interest in their cultural and historical background, especially after 1880, when they were increasingly barred from higher functions in the mission and the colonial government, due to the development of racialist attitudes and the formation of a more formal colonial system. This put the Western-educated Yoruba in a position of relative deprivation, and to better their position independently of the colonial structures, they were forced to search for alternative modes of development. These alternatives were found in a cultural identity based on Yoruba culture, the formation of African churches, co-operation with indigenous political elites,⁴⁴ and eventually the formation of a nationalist movement.⁴⁵

The prolific output of local histories and chronicles of Yoruba history in the same period should be seen in this light. With it these Yoruba historians founded a school of Yoruba history that was to influence not only the attitudes of the British government towards the Yoruba hinterland, but also many of the actions of indigenous Yoruba in their dealings with the British far into the twentieth century. This is apart from the influence these works had on the development of historical scholarship in Nigeria in the twentieth century.⁴⁶

Where the attitudes of the British are concerned, by putting onto paper what had up till then been a wholly oral affair, the Yoruba historians provided a new and unprecedented outlook on the history of the region, an outlook that, because it was printed, was in the eyes of the British of much more value than any oral tradition. In a colonial system based on the principle of indirect rule, a system in which it is very important for the colonial authorities to know the workings of 'traditional' society and the base on which it rests, the importance of the availability of a range of traditional historical treatises cannot be overestimated. The viewpoint on the use of written material as decisive evidence in matters of government was of course quickly adopted by the rulers of Yorubaland, who saw that they could improve their position in this manner.⁴⁷

The precise views held by the early Yoruba historians differed themselves, as one can expect, according to their relative position in Yoruba society and the measure of erudition of the particular individual. Samuel Johnson, CMS missionary, raised in Ibadan in a period of continuous civil war, sent his *History of the Yorubas* into the world with the message that the only way to civilisation was through Christianity and British colonial protection. Emmanuel Lijadu, also a CMS missionary, saw more in an independent Yoruba development through Christianity. But then Lijadu grew up in Abeokuta, where up till 1914 an independent government was in place. Cultural societies like the Lagos Institute and the *Egbe Agba O Tan* in Ibadan, directed their attention more towards the position of the Western-educated Yoruba *vis-à-vis* the colonial government.

The *Egbe Agba O Tan* was in that respect a curious mixture of traditions. As their 1914 constitution tells us, it was to be a secret society with the 'aim and object . . . to institute researches into all Yoruba Religions, Customs, Physiology, Medical Knowledge, Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, Poetical Cultures, Political and National Histories &c.' Rule three of the constitution says that 'only Native Gentlemen of Yorubaland are eligible for Membership'. Furthermore the initiation rites, membership classes of 'Knights' of the first, second and third class, and the secrecy surrounding the society give it the character of freemasonry, while the heavy emphasis on Christian attributes weakens this at the same time.⁴⁸

Reflections

In the twentieth century the colonial authorities strengthened the use of traditions for political purposes. The system of indirect rule imposed on the Yoruba, in which those

who could prove 'ancient traditional rights' acquired power within the system, almost begged for further alterations to historical traditions, so much so even, that it has by now almost become impossible to distinguish nineteenth-century 'reality' from nineteenth-century 'invention', and this in turn from twentieth-century 'invention'.⁴⁹ One example is the creation of the so-called 'New Oyo Empire', based on the premise that the Alaafin had always been and therefore still was the overlord of all Yoruba. As indicated before, this notion was itself a creation of Atiba, and was as such no reflection of the actual situation, in which Ibadan, a nominal vassal of Oyo, was in effect far more powerful. When the rivalry for hegemony between Oyo and Ibadan increased in the early days of colonial domination, the government resorted to a 'traditional' solution. In 1924 they established the principle that the Alaafin had the right to depose any of the chiefs in Oyo and Ibadan Divisions. A right rooted in 'native law and custom and by the power conferred on him [the Alaafin] by the [Colonial] Government'.⁵⁰ Of course it was less native law and custom than British authority that enabled the Alaafin to exercise this power. In effect, after the British Resident for Oyo, Captain Ross, had left the region in 1931, it became clear how much the 'New Oyo Empire', as Atanda has called it, was Ross's creation. Soon the structures of this new Oyo state began to crumble, to the advantage of Ibadan.

A complete mix of the three principles underpinning Yoruba historiography is quite clear in this affair: the sources were the received traditions of nineteenth-century Oyo, in themselves already pragmatically processed by the new rulers of Oyo; in turn, in view of the wishes and views of the colonial authorities, they were once more processed, and eventually interpreted within the framework of Western epistemology.

To illustrate this process further, we should look at the British attitude towards the position of Ibadan. By the 1930s the colonial authorities were convinced that Ibadan was politically, because economically, the most important city in the region. Not only that, however: they were also persuaded to think of Ibadan as an *historically* important town, which would eventually lead to a claim to an Obaship, again based on tradition rather than on the actual position the town held. In this process the high value given to written evidence by Europeans played an important role. Already in 1893 J. A. O. Payne, Chief Registrar of the Lagos Supreme Court, noted this love for documentation on the part of the British. In the preface to his *Table of Principal Events in Yoruba History* he stated: 'This work [is] for reference and use in practice before judges, district commissioners, and others in relation to the examination of witnesses in the trial of civil and criminal cases, and other procedures.'⁵¹ With which he implicitly acknowledged the fact that written records were to be valued over and above oral statements.

For the Oyo Durbar of 1925, historical information gathered by and given to the British was still mainly oral. By 1936, when the Baale and Council of Ibadan petitioned the Secretary of State for the Colonies to uphold and strengthen Ibadan's independent position towards Oyo, this situation was definitely different. Extensive quotations were taken from Sir Alan Burns's *Nigeria Handbook*, P. Amaury Talbot's work on Southern Nigeria (1926), Johnson's *History of the Yorubas*, and from several other authors.⁵² Events and customs were recalled according to history, implying accuracy and modernness, rather than according to tradition, which by now apparently had acquired connotations of backwardness and was no longer deemed convincing enough in such a serious matter as the redefinition of Ibadan's political status.

If we want to study the development of Yoruba historiography through the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, we shall have to keep in mind that, apart from the main principles sketched, there are many factors that have influenced Yoruba historiography. In his *The Great Cat Massacre*, a collection of essays on French cultural history, Robert Darnton states that in a narrated tradition the narrator 'creates his text as he goes, picking new routes through old themes . . . [in which] modifications of detail

barely disturb the general configuration'.⁵³ That the narrator makes up the text of his story as he goes along is a general principle and therefore valid for Yoruba traditions as well. In the case of the Yoruba, however, changes in the detail seem to be of great importance. Is it so that, because of the contemporary political significance the Yoruba attach to their historical traditions, the detail of the story becomes the key for the legitimacy, and the explanations of current socio-political constellations?

In this light we can end this chapter with a quotation from the theologian Don Cupitt. In his book *Taking Leave of God*, Cupitt develops an argument on the change in religious traditions, based on Hegel's philosophical model. In our opinion Cupitt's argument is equally valid for the study of Yoruba historiography as it is for theology. We therefore quote this argument here in full, replacing 'history' for 'theology' where applicable:

It is an obvious historical fact that the concepts, and also entire belief-systems, do undergo profound transformations and revisions in the course of time. Hegel saw this and helped to introduce a new kind of philosophical argument . . . in which one takes up a particular set of meanings and beliefs and by pressing their own inner logic transforms them into something significantly new and different.

In all [historical] traditions [historians] have always done this, because it is their peculiar duty to preserve a tradition by changing it. It must be changed if it is to survive, but it has not survived unless the inner spiritual continuity between the old pattern and the new is so persuasively argued that the constituency can with a clear conscience move over to the new standpoint.⁵⁴

Not so much a conclusion, but rather a challenge, not only for the study of Yoruba historiography in its political and social context, but for the study of all African historiography.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this chapter were earlier presented as seminar papers at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 17 February 1987, and at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, January 1988. Research for the chapter undertaken in Nigeria was made possible by a grant of the Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research (WOTRO) and the co-operation of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.
- 2 Ndaywel e Nziem, 'African Historians and Africanist Historians' in B. Jewsiewicki and D. Newbury (eds.), *African Historiographies: what history for which Africa?* Sage, Beverly Hills, 1986; pp. 20-27.
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- 39 J. F. A. Ajayi and R. S. Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1964.
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- 41 Personal communication from Dr S. O. Babayemi, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.
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- 44 Especially in Abeokuta; cf. A. Pallinder, 'Government in Abeokuta 1830-1914, with special reference to the Egba United Government, 1898-1914' (PhD Thesis, Göteborg, 1973) pp. 34-62 and *passim*.
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- 46 Falola, 'A Research Agenda', pp. 216-18.
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