

## The Ègba Council, 1899-1918: I

S. O. Biobaku

Ègba Council Records (1899-1918), carefully preserved in the office of the Clerk of the Council at Ake, Abẹ̀okuta, are the most notable body of historical documents which I found during a recent search in the Ègba country. They portray the efforts of the Ègba to evolve a federal constitution from a welter of traditional authorities and forge the necessary executive power to ensure a just, orderly and progressive government and so save themselves from absorption into the surrounding Southern Nigeria under British rule. The Ègba were ultimately absorbed; but their experience is none-the-less valuable in illustrating the constitutional problems which faced a quasi-independent African Government at the turn of the century. In order to elucidate that experience one must read the Council Records together with the dust-laden files (confidential and open) of the Ègba United Government as well as examine the relevant state documents in both Lagos and London. In an article elsewhere<sup>1</sup> I have sketched the various traditional authorities which the Ègba brought with them into Abẹ̀okuta, their historical development and the forces against the emergence of a truly federal structure in 1872. The gap between 1872 and 1898 is full of experiments in conciliar government which must be reviewed, though not in detail; for unless that gap is filled it is impossible properly to appreciate the importance of the Council inaugurated in 1898.

The Ègba were familiar with the concept of a Council. At the township level, the *Ogboni* house was the Civic Council hall although the business transacted was more often judicial than otherwise. The *Ogboni* had the pride of place with the *Iwarefa* (council of 6) and the *Oluwo* (head of the lodge) sitting in their accustomed places on the mud platform: the other members of the *Ogboni* also sat in their usual places on the floor of the House. The important point was that on civic occasions, the *Olorogun* and the *Parakoyi* were present, with the leader of the *Olorogun* (war chief) admitted into the ranks of the *Iwarefa*. In the deliberations, the *Parakoyi*, and the *Olorogun* gave their views through their spokesmen before the *Ogboni* gave theirs and the judgement. Presumably at the provincial level, the *Ọba*, the *Ogboni*, the *Olorogun* and the *Parakoyi* met at the *Áfin* or palace to form a council. What was lacking at Abẹ̀okuta was a regularly constituted federal council in which all the people were represented, an all-Ègba council with its clearly defined membership and time-honoured procedure. There is evidence, however, that all-Ègba affairs were discussed in 'primary' assemblies held at Ake.

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1. *Africa*, Vol. XXII. No. I. January 1952: *A Historical Sketch or Ègba Traditional Authorities*.

Consul Beecroft visited Abẹokuta in January 1851<sup>2</sup> and attended a public 'palaver' held in front of the *Sagbua*'s<sup>3</sup> house: to Beecroft's right were about twenty war chiefs and their followers; to his left, under the verandah of the Council Chamber sat the *Sagbua* and the 'Commercial Community'<sup>4</sup>; and around stood spectators, including Sierra Leone immigrants (*Egba Saro*). Beecroft addressed the Assembly and replies were made by the *Apena* (an Ogboni spokesman) on general matters and the *Jaguna* (Senior War Chief) on military affairs. Beecroft and his missionary hosts realised that the 'palaver' was only a formal meeting; they canvassed the important chiefs individually at their residences. Finally, it was the assembly of the war chiefs that gave the assurance of eschewing the slave trade in return for British measures to protect the *Egba* against Dahomey. The *Sagbua* passed by at the crucial meeting on his way to attend to his proper function of adjudicating at a case of sheep-stealing; 'foreign affairs' were within the realm of the *Ologun*.

The restoration of the *Alakeship* in 1854 did not lead to the formation of a Federal *Egba* Council, although the *ad hoc* all-*Egba* assembly forgathered in front of the *Āfin* at Ake. The dispute over the succession in 1869, after the death of *Başorun* Şomoye who had been Regent, led to a split among the leading chiefs: one faction met at the *Āfin* under Ademola I, the *de facto* *Alake*; the other met at the house of Akodu, the *Seriki* (war chief) nominally under Oyekan, the rival claimant. The second group, however, took over an organization which had emerged in 1865.<sup>5</sup> The constitution of the *Egba* United Board of Management remains obscure, though it must be recognised as an attempt to engender co-operation between the traditional chiefs and 'educated elements', the *Egba Saro*, with a view to establishing a stable and, in contemporary language, a 'civilized' government at Abẹokuta. Şomoye, the *Başorun*, was styled President-General; Akodu, the *Seriki*, was called 'High Sheriff', and Asalu, the head of the *Ogboni*, was included. The Board was, however, directed and controlled by its Secretary, G. W. Johnson and other leading *Egba Saro*. There is no evidence that it evolved a 'proper council: representative of the traditional, sectional and immigrant elements, although there was an *Olowu* at the time, he was not on the Board. In fact, the Board was little more than an empty bureaucracy, parading sovereign pretensions, and issuing largely idle threats. Its single positive achievement was that it established a short lived

2. F(oreign) O(ffice) 84/858 Beecroft to Palmerston 2/2/1851

3. *Okukenu*, the *Sagbua* of Ake, was the leading *Ogboni* chief and so the civil head of Abẹokuta.

4. 'Commercial community' in source but should really be the civil chiefs or *Ogboni* and the trade chiefs or *Parakoyi*.

5. F.O. 84/1250 Glover to Russell 7/10/1865: enclosure I: *Başorun* to Glover 8/9/865.

Customs Department for levying export duties instead of the customary tolls collected at the gates.

Nevertheless, G. W. Johnson was a remarkable man. Throughout the reign of Ademola I (1869-1877) he kept up the pretensions of his Board and when his candidate, Oyekan, became the *Alake* in 1879, Johnson revised his scheme for grafting a 'civilised' government upon the indigenous stock of traditional authorities. The real composition of the Board is not clear but Johnson was emphatic about a 'United Kingdom' of the *Ègba*, *Alake*, *Olowu*, *Qsile* and *Agura* in 1881. Again, he tried to provide his 'government' with some revenue by regularizing the collection of tolls, and a remarkable document<sup>6</sup> guaranteed an emolument of 10% of all tolls collected in Abẹokuta and territories to Johnson, his heirs and assigns. That was too much for his enemies, the *Ègba* merchants, and Johnson was expelled from Abẹokuta in 1881. He returned, however, ill 1884, gained the confidence of the new *Alake*, Oluwaju, and styled himself *Amalia Qba* (the King's vizier). The Board of Management reappeared, strangely tinged with freemasonry. A letter<sup>7</sup> notifying the appointment of a new member of the Board to its representative in Lagos shows Johnson's extravagant notions of what was needed:

'As our representative Agent in Lagos, I am to inform you that according to late arrangements, by the Directors, of the Prince United House of Assembly, a Department for Peace and Protection of Commerce between this and the Trading Community of Lagos, is being established—His Majesty has been pleased to confer the honour and title of Master of Trade on Mr. S. J. Peters, of this Place in the township of *Itesi* having thus admitted a Member of the Board of Management in the 15<sup>th</sup> instant: This Gentleman who is now M.B. in this Government will shortly be Initiated, at Rock Hill<sup>8</sup> according to our prescribed forms of Oath of Allegiance. This is a step in the right direction . . . . .'

6. From G. W. Johnson's Papers which I studied, by courtesy of the present *Alake Ademola II*; the agreement was passed by the Directors of the United Board of Management, 29/1/1881 and also guaranteed to Johnson one head of Cowry *per diem* for his services as founder of the: E.U.B.M. and another head of cowry *per diem* for a second staff conferred on him by successive *Alake*. It was 'ordered to be enrolled in the first Book of Record as Memorandum of Agreement and confirmed by the *Alake* under the National Flag Seal of the United Kingdom...in the presence of the Directors at Ake Foundation House, this 31st day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eighty-one'.

7. Johnson's Papers: Johnson to J. P. Haastrup, 29/8/1885.

8. The *Olumo* Rock, refuge of the first *Ègba* settlers at Abẹokuta and has since become the national shrine.

Lagos was to be officially informed and the Ègba Society in Sierra Leone notified. There is no evidence, however, of the existence of a 'Prince United House of Assembly' or that the new cabinet minister actually took office. Real power in Abeokuta remained in the hands of the *Ologun*; neither Oluwaji, who died in 1889, nor Oşokalu, who succeeded him in 1891, could control the powerful war chiefs. By 1893, when Governor Carter<sup>9</sup> of Lagos visited Abeokuta, the Ègba were ruled by a triumvirate of two war chiefs, the *Jaguna* and the *Mogaji* (the heir of *Başorun* Şomoye's house) and Nlado, the leading *Ogboni* chief. These three chiefs and Oşokalu, the *Alake*, signed the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with Governor Carter which guaranteed the independence of the Ègba Government and brought to an end the era of political conflicts with Lagos colony. Ogundeyi, the *Mogaji*, became the *Başorun* in 1895 and thereafter ruled 'the Ègba with an iron rod'.<sup>10</sup> In vain, G. W. Johnson attempted to regain influence by encouraging Adepegba, the *Olowu*, to pursue a refractory policy towards the *Başorun* and the *Alake*; the *Başorun* secured his final<sup>11</sup> expulsion from Abeokuta at a decisive public assembly. The *Başorun*'s own nephew, W. H. Tinney Şomoye, became the amanuensis and real director of the Ègba government.

Johnson's abortive efforts had a definitely constructive side in that he stressed the federal aspect of the Ègba constitution, though he failed to devise the necessary federal council. He had also established the right of the immigrant elements, the Ègba *Saro*, to participate in, and to direct, the affairs of the Ègba: the indigenous rulers required their better understanding, in view of their education, of the contemporary issues of government. The British government at Lagos could be successfully resisted only by an enlightened administration at Abeokuta. Many Ègba *Saro* shared Johnson's analysis of the situation and were equally anxious to evolve a stable government at Abeokuta. Prince Ademola<sup>12</sup> was prominent among those who advocated the full resuscitation of the four *obaships* and in 1897 the Oke Qna section was persuaded to elect an *Qsile*.<sup>13</sup> The next step was to bring all the four Qba, the *Alake*, the *Qsile*, the *Agura* and the *Olowu*, together to form the nucleus of

9. Sir Gilbert Carter visited Abeokuta in January, 18931 on his way to pacify the interior: his report was sent to the Marquess of Ripon in the form of a despatch.

10. Vide John Blair; *Intelligence Report on Abeokuta*, 1937: quoting Lagos Govt. House Despatch No. 184 of 1895.

11. The Ègba Deputation Club from Lagos pleaded in vain for Johnson's return to Abeokuta in 1896: he died in Lagos in 1899.

12. Now Ademola II. the *Alake* from 1920.

13. Karunwi was the first *Qsile* at Abeokuta. The *Oke Qna* people were reported to be reluctant to elect an *Qba* because their rulers invariably came to a bad end. Of the six *Qsile* installed from 1897 to 1950, only two died natural deaths, the rest were either deposed, exiled or murdered.

a federal Council; that was a revolutionary step, fraught with great psychological peril to the *Ọba* themselves, who firmly believed in the tradition that crowned heads never met one another face to face. That the step was taken is a tribute to the good sense of the *Ègba* and the statesman like insistence of Governor Macallum of Lagos. The tyrannical excesses of Abọqaba, the *Balogun*, who in 1898 was aspiring to *Bașorun* Ogundeyi's absolutism, gave Macallum the long awaited opportunity to intervene.<sup>14</sup> The *Balogun* and the *Seriki* were dismissed from their self-arrogated positions of sole advisers to the *Alake* and Macallum devised an *Ègba* Council.

In 1898 *Ègba* society could be divided vertically into the four historic provinces of *Ègba Alake*, *Oke-Ọna*, *Gbagura* and *Owu*, each with its own townships. Some of these townships, especially III the *Ègba Alake*, had certain traditional prerogatives<sup>15</sup> which must be satisfied in any acceptable composition of an all-*Ègba* Council, Horizontally, *Ègba* society was split into religious and cultural units of 'heathens', Moslems and Christians. The 'heathens' comprised the majority of the indigenous *Ègba*, the traditional title bearers and the lineage heads. Many of the younger generation had become Moslem and contemning the traditional chieftainship as pagan they were anxious to create their own chiefships within the *Ègba* state. The Christians, indigenous converts as well as Sierra Leone and Brazilian Immigrants, had their own warchiefs<sup>16</sup> and were eager to capture the machinery of government and direct it while leaving the traditional chiefs in nominal control. A successful federal council must reconcile all the diverse interests in its composition. Macallum proposed a Council of eight members (besides the *Alake*, its chairman) consisting of the other three *Ọba*, the *Seriki*<sup>17</sup> of the *Ègba*, the chief of the Moslems, the *Balogun* of the Christians, the *Olori Parakoyi* (also a Christian), the *Apena* of Iporo 'to represent the *Ègba Alake* section'. To each of these councillors Macallum asked the *Alake* to entrust a department of state.<sup>18</sup>

The official proclamation which inaugurated the *Ègba* National Council assigned 'portfolios' to seven members of a 'Council of State', to assist the *Alake* 'in [his] government', as follows: The *Ọsile* (Justice), the *Olowu* (Finance), the *Agura* (Communications and Works), the chief of the Moslems (Public Order), the *Olori Parakoyi* (Trade and Agriculture) and the *Balogun* of the

14. Blair: op. cit., para. 54. Macallum 'decided to treat the *Alake* and the chiefs with a firmness and show of authority to which they were perfectly unaccustomed'.

15. See my article, loc. cit., p. 39.

16. *Okenla*, the first *Balogun* of the Christians, led his own contingents against the Dahomi and distinguished himself especially in the 1863 invasion of Abẹokuta.

17. Abọqaba, the *Balogun* of the *Ègba*, was not included in the Council of State and was deported to Ibadan in 1898 for insubordination. He was reinstated in 1907.

18. See Blair, op. cit., para. 116.

Christians (Sanitation and Public Health). In this arrangement both the *Seriki* and the *Apena* of Iporo, suggested by Governor Macallum, were left out, although the Proclamation ended with the words 'and I do hereby direct...ect., etc.' which might be interpreted to mean that the composition of the Council had not been finally settled. The 'Cabinet', however, never functioned as such and failure to implement this scheme of devolution of executive power was blamed again and again on the *Alake* and his closest advisers as evidence of their autocratic disposition. The Egbá National Council was, therefore, only a deliberative assembly, discussing and approving measures proposed by the *Alake* and the Government Secretary, the permanent head of the executive. In August, 1898, Gbadebo<sup>19</sup> became the *Alake* and in January, 1902, *Adegboyega Edun* (alias Rev. J. Henryson Samuel)<sup>20</sup> was appointed Government Secretary. For 16 years these two men, one illiterate and the other learned, dominated the council and attempted to transform the traditional authorities into a competent and progressive machinery of government. With the Railway Agreement concluded with the Lagos Government in 1899 came the Railway Commissioner, representing British influence and power, protecting the Egbá Government and at once threatening it as it came more and more to rely upon that protection against the disruptive influences within, flaring up each time the Egbá Government launched an unpopular but necessary scheme to save its independence.

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19. Gbadebo was the son of Okukenu, the first *Alake* at Abẹokuta, and was born on the day the crown was fetched from Orile Ake. He owed his election to the influence of his maternal uncle Alli Seidu, of Ijeun, subsequently *Seriki* of the Egbá.

20. Rev. J. H. Samuel was a distinguished Egbá. Educated partly in England, he became a Methodist Minister and served as the Principal of the Wesleyan Boys' High School at Lagos before he went to Abẹokuta to take up his key appointment.