Some Western Yoruba Towns

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In Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* we read the myth that Oduduwa had seven grandchildren: 'The second child was a princess who became the mother of the Alaketu, the progenitor of the Ketu people ... the fifth, the Onishabe, or king of the Shabes; the sixth, Olupupo, or king of the Popos'.²⁴

According to this tradition, which is repeated in other histories, there are important groups of Yoruba people outside modern Nigeria who originate from the same stock as the Nigerian Yorubas. Ketu and Shabe (or Savé) are Yoruba towns in modern French Dahomey; their inhabitants speak Yoruba and are proud of their Yoruba descent. Their own traditions confirm their origin from Ile-Ife. The Popos are more mixed. The word Popo is used rather vaguely for people along the Dahomean coast, from Porto Novo to Little Popo (Anecho).

The frontier between Nigeria and Dahomey is artificial, and Yoruba-speaking people are found on both sides of it. Estimates of the numbers vary, but probably some 170,000 people of Dahomey are Yoruba or close relatives. The most recent census figures for Dahomey give: Nago (the Dahomean name for Yoruba) 90,000; Tsha (Shabe) 54,000; Ana or Ife (Togo) 14,000; Ketu over 10,000.²⁵

Porto Novo and the South

The modern colony of Dahomey stretches from the coast to the upper Niger and includes many peoples that were outside the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. Porto Novo, capital of the modern colony, is of mixed population. The name Porto Novo was given to the place by the Portuguese, the Yorubas call it Ajase and the Gun (Egun) inhabitants call it Hogbonu. This most ancient part of the town, a village called Aklon, was founded by a hunter from Ahori called Oba-gaju. For some centuries it was a small collection of huts without much organization, till in the 17th century there came a conqueror from Allada called Te Agbanlin who by ruse and by force gradually gained control over all the region. Te Agbanlin built the large house after which the town is still called by the natives, Hogbonu, 'big house'.

We cannot follow here the story of Porto Novo; there is, however, a Yoruba history of the place.²⁶ Such Yoruba influence as there was gradually gave place to the larger numbers of Gun invaders. But some of the officials of the town

24. S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 1921, pp. 7-8.

25. D. Forde, *The Yoruba-speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, Ethnographic Survey, 1951, pp. 42-43.

26. A. Akindele, *Iwe Itan Ajase*, 1914 and 1930.

have Yoruba ancestry. The first 'King of the night' (Zunon, lit. 'master of the forest') was a native of Ijebu. The eighth king, De Ayikpe (1775-1783) introduced more Yorubas to the town and in the squabbles that followed his death the Yoruba nobles brought about a settlement. Under later kings there was war with Badagry, and a civil war in which help was sought from Lagos.

Porto Novo suffered, as did most of these small kingdoms, in the Dahomean wars of the 19th century. Also, because of slave-trading, they were bombarded by a British gunboat which sailed up the creek from Lagos in 1861. For these reasons the king of Porto Novo sought a French protectorate which was nominal from 1861 and definitive in 1882. After the destruction of the Dahomean kingdom of Abomey by the French in 1892, a frontier agreement was reached between French and British. Porto Novo was on the French side, and a practically straight line was drawn from south to north some miles to the east of the town. This had the effect of separating much more truly Yoruba kingdoms, Ketu and Shabe, from their fellow Yorubas in Nigeria.

There are still numbers of Yoruba people in Porto Novo; many of the inhabitants are bi-lingual, speaking both the Gun language and Yoruba, and there is easy intermarriage. In the administrative areas around the town are several Yoruba villages and further north, near the Nigerian frontier, are larger Yoruba towns.

Twenty miles to the north of Porto Novo is Saketé (or Itakete), the head Yoruba town of an administrative subdivision. According to its traditions it was founded, somewhere about the 16th century, by Yoruba hunters from the region of the river Yewa. The founder was named Asogba. The armies of Qyọ frequently crossed this country when exacting tribute from Dahomey, from 1728 onwards. In the 19th century there was an influx of Egbado people into the Saketé during the Owu wars. And the ferocious Dahomeans also ravaged the country. At their approach the Qba of Saketé, Aniwa, fled to Porto Novo to seek protective alliance.²⁷

Twenty miles further north is Pobé, another Yoruba subdivision, which is on the edge of a great marsh inhabited by the Ahoi (or Holli, or Dje) people. It is not certain whether these marshy retreats for much of the year, are true Yoruba. They may have been the aboriginal inhabitants of the plateau on which Ketu stands, or they may have been driven away from the west of Dahomey to their present home. But today their language, customs and religious beliefs are similar to those of other Yoruba peoples.

27. P. Mercier, 'Notice sur le peuplement Yoruba au Dahomey-Togo', *Etudes Dahoméennes*, IV, 1950.

Ketu, Shabe, and Central Dahomey.

Twenty miles still further north is the ancient Yoruba town of Ketu. It is hoped that a complete study of the history of Ketu will appear in print. Suffice it to say here that Ketu is one of the oldest of all the Yoruba kingdoms, and it has a history which goes back many centuries. The town is small today, having been seriously reduced through the Dahomean wars and by being cut off by the frontier from communications with other towns. But Ketu still has part of its old walls and its fortified gate intact, and there is now a project of a fine modern road which will link it more easily to Porto Novo.

Ketu lays positive claim to origin from Ile-Ife, and the present Alaketu (king of Ketu) is the 48th monarch in a long line that goes right back to the migration from Ife. The town is linked with Mekaw in Nigeria, which formed part of its domains together with several other Nigerian villages. The Alake of Abeokuta himself is said, by Egbas traditions, to have come from Ketu. After centuries of peace Ketu was destroyed by the Dahomeans in 1883 and 1886, but it was rebuilt and its traditions continued in 1893.

Shabe (called Savé by the French) is a town of some 15,000 inhabitants. Larger now than Ketu, and with better road and rail connexions, it is a much younger place. The genealogy of the kings gives only ten royal ancestors for the present town, but it is believed that their predecessors came down from the north in various stages. One leader of the migration from the north is said to have left members of his family at different stopping-places: Parakou, Tchaorou, Kilibo and Kaboua. Parakou and Tchaorou are in Bariba country today, and perhaps the Shabe traditions are mingled with those of the Bariba; but at Tchaorou there are still Yoruba chiefs ruling a majority of Bariba.

The general tradition, held at Ketu as well, is that the Shabe ancestors went first to settle at Kilibo but had to leave later, and eventually settled in the present town of Shabe. J. O. George thinks that they went first to Qyq, and says, 'The Shabes becoming numerous, it was agreed with the king that they migrate to another place. Accordingly, hunters were sent to seek a very good spot ... Reaching a place called Kilibo, Ajugalata fell ill and died. After his death, Olla Segi brought the people to the place chosen by the hunters. It contained a large number of trees called Ede, and from this the name Shabe was derived'.²⁸ The derivation is dubious.

Shabe also suffered in the conflicts between Qyq and Dahomey. George gives one version of the struggle: 'The Dahomians under Shabe refused to pay tribute to the Alāfin. As Oli Shabe was the medium through whom the presents and tribute pass, the Dahomians made war against him. He conquered and drove them far and would have exterminated them, but for the

28. J. O. George, *Historical Notes on the Yoruba Tribes*, 1895, pp. 23-24

intervention of the king of Ashantee who protected the Dahomians from the fury of the Shabes'. The Dahomeans were trying to throw off the yoke of Oyo at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, and finally succeeded in doing so in 1827 in a battle not far from Shabe. The Ashanti warriors do, indeed, appear to have come near this part and several villages near Shabe have Ashanti names.

Walls were built around Shabe by a queen called Ine Mego, who was acting as regent, but these did not finally protect the town from its foes. It suffered from both sides. 'Some time after', says George, 'there arose a misunderstanding between the Oloyo and the Shabe people. For this cause Kurumi of Ijaiye as head Ona Kakanfo of the Oloyo forces, encamped against Shabe, took it, destroyed the fortifications and took many captives'. The Dahomeans, in their turn, sacked Shabe in 1825 and again in 1887. With French rule peace came at last to a kingdom very much deprived of its former power. Today Shabe is a small Yoruba town. Its ancient palace (*āfin*) was destroyed by an administrator several years ago. I have searched the ruins, of which only the dilapidated gateway is recognizable.

Other Yoruba towns in Dahomey are less ancient or are of mixed blood. The most important is Dassa (Da-sha), with a population of 26,600 for the town and district. There was a nucleus of very ancient Yoruba blood, with later immigrants during the Egba wars. The 'Hill King' of this town represents the oldest inhabitants. He must never be seen in the village at the foot of the hill after dark, and at the enthronement rites it is he who finally invites the modern chief to take his throne saying, 'I give you a seat'.²⁹

Numerous villages scattered in the wooded country of central Dahomey are Yoruba-speaking. One may trace three stages in their history, at least. A very ancient movement from Ife across central Dahomey and into Togo; then a recoil under pressure of Ashanti and other peoples; and finally mixture of later immigrants, some of Yoruba and some of Dahomean stock. Some of these people, round Djalloukou in Dahomey and Atakpamé in Togo, are still called by the name 'Ife'. Their numbers are estimated at over 14,000.

Origin from Ile- Ife.

In common with practically all the Yoruba peoples, the Dahomean Yorubas claim to have come from Ile-Ife. There appear to have been several westward movements. Quite recently there were groups of 'displaced persons' in the 19th century, going backwards and forwards. Before that, the 16th century seems to have been a time of travelling west. But the first migration that is remembered in legend was much earlier than this. It is very precarious to

29. G. Parrinder, 'Yoruba-speaking Peoples in Dahomey', *Africa*, XVII, April, 1947.

attempt to estimate a date for this; a French authority suggests that the first Yoruba migration westwards was possibly about the 13th century A.D.³⁰

On this earliest migration the traditions of Ketu ore by far the dearest. They say that a prince of Ifẹ called Sho-ipashan (or Tsheikpatshen) was the originator of the movement, and ancestor not only of the people of Ketu but also of Shabe and Oyo. When I asked the Alaketu what was the relationship between Sho-ipashan and Oduduwa, because the latter is given by Johnson as ancestor of the Yorubas, the Alaketu replied that Oduduwa was the wife of Sho-ipashan. This fits in with a western Yoruba belief that Oduduwa was female, but other Yoruba legends regard him as male. Extensive inquiry has failed to find any references in other histories to Sho-ipashan, and if any reader of this article can give any information about him I should be glad to hear of it.

Sho-ipashan left Ile-Ifẹ, probably after a war, and set out for the west with a large retinue. The first settlement was made on the Awyan, a tributary of the river Ogun above modern Abeokuta, on a hill called Oke-awyan. After some time the party became too numerous and split into three, led by three brother princes. The first set out still further west towards Ketu. The second went north-west to Kilibo and eventually to Shabe. The third and youngest prince went north and founded Old Oyo. This agrees with Johnson's version, in which the Oyo people come from the youngest of the stock, but according to him from the seventh grandchild of Oduduwa.

Ketu traditions then say that their ancestors settled again at a place called Aro, where five more kings reigned. Sho-ipashan went with them and died at Aro, his body being taken back to Oke-awyan for burial. Finally under the seventh king, Ede, the migrants split into three again and King Ede led his people to found Ketu. Guided by a hunter called Alalumon, they reached the dry plateau on which Ketu stands. A decaying iroko tree-stump is still to be seen at Ketu, where the hunter Alalumon is said to have hung his gamebag. The last stage of the journey to Ketu, through Mekaw and other villages, is ritually repeated by every king of Ketu to this day at his enthronement. The unbroken list of 48 kings of Ketu must take the history of this town back a long way. It compares well with the 40 kings of Oyo given in Johnson's history.

The Egbas people later branched away from Ketu, according to both Ketu and Egbas tradition. The Egbas version is given by the historians, such as Ajiṣafe and Dr. Biobaku, 'The Alaketu and the Alake first settled together in Ketu, and the Alake was engaged in cloth-weaving. Several years after the Alake was

30. P. Mercier, *op. cit.*

brought to settle in Egba forest by a Ketu hunter named Ako-Agbo'.³¹ This may have been the sixth king of Ketu, Agbo-Akoko (Agbo I).

According to the Ketu people the title of the Alake is derived from the name of the small market at Ketu. This is Qja-kekere, abbreviated to Qja-ke, and finally to A-ke. When Abẹokuta was founded, say the Ketu traditions a branch from a tree at this Ketu market was taken to be planted at the Ake in Abẹokuta. From all this it should be clear that these western Yoruba people, and especially the towns of Ketu and Shabe, are true members of the Yoruba stock and have played an important part in the development of the race.

31. A. K. Ajişafe, *History of Abẹokuta*, 1924, p. 10.