



A Tale of Two Empires: A Forensic Analysis of How and Why the Ethiopians Escaped Colonization but the Yorubas Did Not

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A millennium ago they cast bronze and brass, smelted iron and copper, built walled cities with tens of thousands of inhabitants and at one point ruled a fine slice of West Africa. By 1886-that momentous year-they had modern weapons including rifles, rockets and The Gatling Gun. Yet they fared no better than the most primitive spear wielding African tribe in the theatre of colonization. Why? This paper examines why given their relative state of advancement The Yoruba people were colonized especially vis-à-vis The Ethiopians who escaped colonization.

In the 19th century European nations were obsessed with colonizing Africa and Asia. They even had comparatively enlightened Japan in their sights!

“Russian ships made visits to Japan in 1792, 1804 and 1811 and it is possible that if Russia’s attention had not been diverted to European problems it would have succeeded in breaking the seclusion policy [of the Japanese].....HMS Phaeton forced an entry into Nagasaki in 1808 causing consternation among The Japanese authorities.....Raffles in reports (1812-1816) to the secret committee of the East India Company , outlined a far reaching scheme for the commercial domination of Japan and sent two British ships to Nagasaki....plans were even put forward in some quarters for the annexation of Formosa, the Luchus and The Bonins.....During this crucial period Japan was saved from the dangers of political and economic domination by foreign powers through their preoccupation in the international field. Britain....was concentrating...in China, France was.....entangled in Mexico....The American Republic was prevented by the civil war from taking a very active part.....” [1].

Berlin Conference aside, the colonization of The Yoruba by The British cannot be understood without understanding

the lives of three very adroit Yoruba men viz Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther [died 1891] and his cousins, The Brothers Johnson. Descendants of the emperor of Oyo when Oyo was at its peak in the late 1700s [Alaafin Abiodun] these men virtually single handedly engineered Yoruba colonization by The British. Ajayi Crowther, the first black bishop of The Anglican Church was an extremely gifted linguist. He could speak many languages and took a degree in classics. He also received a doctorate from Oxford University. His genius is probably best exemplified by his translation of The Holy Bible to Yoruba and the compilation of the first ever Yoruba/ English Dictionary. Yet for all his genius, it was he who advised Queen Victoria to authorize the bombardment of Lagos with the battleship HMS Bloodhound in 1851. This was the very start of the colonization of The Yorubas; and netted Britain her first piece of Yoruba territory-Lagos. Samuel Johnson [1846-1901], an Anglican priest and gifted historian penned the famous History of The Yorubas From The Earliest Times To The Beginning of The British Protectorate. Obadiah Johnson [1849-1920] his brother was a brilliant chap-as cunning as he was clever. He obtained not one but two medical degrees from the University of Edinburgh. The Bachelor of Medicine [M.B., C.M] in 1886 and the Doctor of Medicine [M.D.] in 1889. The very cunning intrigues of these “three musketeers” decided the fate of millions.

Background

By 1886 Christianity had been in Yorubaland for 43 years [since 1843] but despite intense evangelism had made very little progress. An exception was among the Egba branch of The Yoruba. Persecution by the majority pagans against the few Christian converts existed but only in isolated bursts. Very few Yoruba Christians were actually killed for their faith. Most persecution came in the form shunning, mockery and ostracization. Yoruba Christians could never get pagans to marry them so the few Christians

married among themselves and were quite tightknit. Most of these pioneer Yoruba Christians were Protestant Christians of Church of England [Anglican] affiliation. Some highly forward thinking and intelligent fanatics among them began to realize that Christianity would never catch on without something dramatic happening. Something dramatic like a military invasion from Christian Britain. Yoruba Christians were treated like second class citizens by the rank and file Yoruba pagans but the Yoruba leaders offered them protection and courted them because the Christians had a skill the pagan rulers needed and prized-the ability to speak and write the White man's language [English]. So it was that these Christians drafted and translated letters for monarchs. One can see how the opportunity and temptation for manipulation and deceit was great under such conditions. A lot was added and lost in translation.

That the Yoruba Christian intelligentsias were liberal in the translation of letters is on record. The Reverend Samuel Johnson even advised it in History of the Yorubas. Critiquing a letter from The Acting Governor of Lagos [Fred Evans] to some pagan Yoruba rulers The Reverend Samuel Johnson was sure that part of the spirit of the letter would be lost in translation. Hear him viz- "But happily the patronizing language of the letter which discloses so much thinly veiled contempt will be lost in translation, and in other respects interpreters MAY BE TRUSTED to make up in tone and expression for what is wanting in style and diction [2]. In those days when pagan Yoruba kings had the power of life and death the Yoruba Christian intelligentsia ameliorated harsh letters and animated tepid letters at will to suit the situation and temper of recipients and to save their own skins. No opportunity to alter the meanings of documents to their great advantage arose as did in 1886 however. Two Yoruba armies with combined forces of over two hundred thousand men had fought themselves to exhaustion. One of the sides had obtained the Gatling gun and the snider rifle and was slowly but surely annihilating the other side which was using mostly muskets [3]. This was the golden opportunity the Yoruba Christian Intelligentsia had been waiting for. The Yoruba Christian intelligentsia approached the losing side and informed them they could bring an immediate end to the war. If only they would allow Great Britain to mediate in the war, British troops (armed with state of the art Martini Henry Rifles, rockets and Maxim Guns) would guarantee their safe withdrawal and decampment from the battlefield and escort them home. But the losing side would have to accept a British Resident and British Colonial troops in their towns to "protect them" from the winning side's ostensible future reprisal. What the Yoruba Christian Intelligentsia did not tell them was that they would as a result cease to rule themselves and would be joining the British Empire. Not realizing what they were getting themselves into, the losing side of course agreed. In what must have been a state of

ecstasy the Yoruba Christians headed to Lagos to see The British Governor General who must have thought Christmas had come early. The news was almost too good to be true. Without resistance, here were a local people willing to put themselves under The British Empire's protection! And so the terms of the decampment and peace treaty were worked out by the Yoruba Christian intelligentsia and The British Governor General of Lagos. Three decades earlier, it had taken the bombardment of Lagos by the battleship HMS Bloodhound and the loss of hundreds of lives for the British to take Lagos from the Yoruba. Now the far more populous hinterland was coming to The British without any resistance! Post-haste the Yoruba Christian minority headed to the battlefield and got the losing side to sign the documents they had drawn up in collusion with the Governor General of Lagos. To get the winning side to sign up was not so easy but eventually they too signed. The Christian minority had pulled it off. What decades of furious evangelism could not achieve had been achieved in a matter of days! The 1886 documents guaranteed protection from persecution to all Christians and forced the pagan rulers to encourage the preaching of the Gospel. Human sacrifice, part and parcel of the Yoruba pagan religion was also abolished. And to enforce all these, British Colonial troops armed with state of the art Martini Henry Rifles were stationed in every Yoruba town. In this new dispensation the hitherto despised Christians became the elite, second only to the pagan rulers themselves. Mass conversions to Christianity slowly but surely took place and churches and mission schools sprung up like mushrooms. The tables had turned and the Yoruba pagans and muslims were now the second class citizens. If those pagan Yoruba rulers and their armies had been told that by affixing their marks to that 1886 treaty (instigated by the Reverend Samuel Johnson) they were handing sovereignty over to the British, to a man they would have buried the hatchet and united against the white usurpers. Ever heard the tale of the frog gradually boiled without realizing it? That was how Yoruba colonization took place. It is very important to note that there was NO disarmament of any kind during the 1886 treaty armistice ceremony. Both previously warring factions returned to their cities with every sword still in its scabbard and every rifle still slung on shoulder. No arms or ammunition was surrendered and no guns stacked. The pagan soldiers hadn't the foggiest idea that they were being colonized. Disarmament by the crafty British took place slowly over the next decade. And when the pagan rulers finally realized what the British were up to they fought back but by then it was too little too late. Too many British troops had been quartered in the land. The pagans were soundly defeated as typified in the 1892 Ijebu campaign and the 1895 bombardment of Oyo fiasco.

As he wrote the last words of History of The Yorubas Samuel Johnson inadvertently let the cat out of the bag. In

collusion with the C.M.S. [whom he sent the manuscript through] his goal was to create a Christian country.

“With the establishment of The British Protectorate a new era dawned upon the country. When we have allowed for all the difficulties of a transition stage, the disadvantages that must of necessity arise by the application of rules and ideas of a highly civilized people to one of another race, degree of civilization and of different ideas, we hope the net result will be a distinct gain to the country...and ABOVE ALL that CHRISTIANITY SHOULD BE THE PRINCIPAL RELIGION IN THE LAND-paganism and mohammedanism having had their full trial [4].

Conclusion

Despite their relatively high state of advancement The Yorubas ended up being colonized because of the subversive trickery/treachery of a handful of Christian fanatics. This highly intelligent but opportunistic Yoruba Christian minority in collusion with The Church Missionary Society fooled the illiterate pagan Yorubas into signing away their sovereignty. The indisputable proof for this hypothesis is that the only Yorubas who had converted to Christianity to any appreciable degree by 1886 (The Egba) escaped colonization up till the year 1914! The Egbas formed a sort of Christian “state within the state” and even sent ambassadors to King Edward of England! However, numbering only a few thousand and being landlocked their country [styled “Egba United Government”] was doomed to lose its independence and be absorbed into Nigeria by Lord Lugard, a full 28 years

after the partition of Africa/Berlin conference [5]!

Ethiopia had a system of writing so the literacy trick couldn't be pulled on them. Ethiopia had also been Christian since the 4th century, even before Britain, Germany and most of Europe. Yes, Ethiopians were celebrating Easter and Christmas and going to church when the British and Germans were still worshipping Thor and Odin. So the Christianization excuse for colonization couldn't be pulled on The Ethiopians. This is why the Yoruba were colonized but The Ethiopians were not.

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