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IWE IROHIN AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE UNIVERSAL IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EGBALAND¹

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I

The nineteenth century was in many ways a revolutionary one among the Yoruba of western Nigeria. The Yoruba civil wars caused much social and political disorganization of the existing entities in Yorubaland.² Among other effects, the wars caused the uprooting of conquered and devastated peoples from their original homes to new lands. The Egba people were one of these. From their original homeland they moved south to settle at Abeokuta in 1830. They were later to be joined by other displaced peoples including the Ijaiye and the Owu, thus making Abeokuta a federation of sorts. The initial decades of settlement at Abeokuta were devoted to the consolidation of the new settlement against the attacks of the stronger and older kingdoms of Ijebu and Dahomey, to continued participation in the ongoing civil wars, and to the challenges of domestic political and economic reorganization. From 1839 liberated slaves from Sierra Leone began to settle in Abeokuta, soon to be followed by European missionaries.

II

The abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the British Isles in 1807, and slavery itself in 1833, led to the establishment of Sierra Leone for the settlement of freed slaves. These were not just slaves that were liberated in Europe and the Americas, but also those rescued on the high seas by the

¹“Iwe Iroyin” literally means “newspaper” in the Yoruba language. I wish to acknowledge Mrs. Akin-Alade, who inspired and supervised the research of this work.

²For more on the Yoruba civil wars see Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba* (Lagos, 1897).

British naval anti-slave trade squadron. The organization of the colonies was not altogether satisfactory to many of the liberated slaves. There were frequent Temne attacks, and few marriageable women and inadequate land for cultivation.³ From the 1840s many of the Yoruba settlers began demanding that they be allowed to return to their original homes. Other factors may be advanced to account for this. First, there was a feeling of patriotism and concern at the news they heard about the ongoing wars in their homeland, which produced a wish to be reunited with their kin. Also, some of them had become successful businessmen, owning ships and trading vessels with which they traded on the west African coast and in the interior. Success was an added motivation. On the other hand, those who were less successful sought their fortunes outside the limits they experienced in the colonies. Many of these were new converts and had a messianic motivation to spread their newly-acquired values of Christianity and civilization.

In 1839, 39 leading merchants, led by one Thomas Wills, applied to the Sierra Leonean administration for "passports ...to be allowed to return home."⁴ Between this date and 1843, many liberated slaves emigrated to Yorubaland. The coastal port of Badagry was to be their first port of call. However, they could not stay there long because Badagry had a sparse population and no central administration, and remained an active slave port. Neither did it have the legitimate economic base for the settlement of the liberated slaves. The Egba influence was strong in Badagry at the time as a result of the Egba-Dahomey war, with Badagry serving as the southern limit of the new Egba kingdom. Abeokuta would have seemed the obvious choice for the repatriated Creoles to seek settlement.

It was to ensure that the Creoles did not forsake Christianity as they reintegrated into African society that the Christian Missionary Society sent Reverend Henry Townsend on a "mission of research" to investigate the possibility of establishing a missionary settlement.⁵ Earlier, some other missionaries, including the Methodist Thomas B. Freeman, had begun operating among the settlers at Badagry.⁶ As the settlers moved on to Abeokuta, the missionaries moved with them. The new settlers were well received at Abeokuta, where they were allocated a separate quarter in the town.

³Hollis Lynch, "Sierra Leone and Liberia in the Nineteenth Century" in J. F. Ajayi and Ian Espie, *One Thousand Years of West African History* (Ibadan, 1965), 333.

⁴J. F. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891* (London, 1965), 27.

⁵*Ibid.*, 32.

⁶*Ibid.*

The new settlers exercised tremendous influence in Abeokuta, introducing new ideas and inspirations. Missionary and settler influence were manifested in architecture, health, education, and in industries and infrastructures. They established schools and vocations such as brickmaking and laying, carpentry, tailoring, and printing. Henry Townsend committed a hand press he had obtained from his brother to the publication of the *Iwe Iroyin*.⁷

III

It is a mark of the cultural dislocations and the challenges that confronted the Egba that they accepted the slaves and missionaries into their otherwise traditional society. It is significant that their neighbors, the Ijebus, rejected foreign settlement in—or even passage through—their country. Dahomey was even more opposed to European or missionary penetration of the interior. Unlike these states, Abeokuta was much less close-knit, politically or culturally. Indeed, it was not until 1848 that the institution of Obaship was established on the advice of Henry Townsend, who argued that the only way the Egba could survive in the region was if they had their own ruler.⁸ Prior to the monarchy, each settler group was ruled by its pre-settlement rulers and elders, or whatever remained of its political organization. Typically, this did not amount to much. The traditional institutions, including the paraphernalia and objects on which governance was produced, had been lost as they fled their original homeland. Indeed, the lines of succession to kingship had become blurred or extinct. Furthermore, traditional norms and taboos that conventionally guided law and order were progressively questioned and challenged.

On the one hand, there was a strong debate on the values of those norms. The popular instance of Aare Kurunmi's criticism of traditional worship and the relationship between the spiritual realm and royalty captures the flimsy base on which the traditional law was based.⁹ On the other hand, the slave trade, wars, and raids had increased despite the British ban and blockades. This made life uncertain, and control of any sort tended to depend more on power and wealth than on any pristine cultural form. Records show that prominent citizens kept their own armies and slave raid gangs called the *Onisunmomi*.¹⁰ While it was not a

⁷Increase E. H. Coker, *Landmarks of the Nigerian Press* (Ibadan, 1976), 5.

⁸J. H. Blair, *Abeokuta Intelligence Report* (Lagos, 1937), 6.

⁹Ola Rotimi's play captures the cultural contests that defined the Ijaiye wars; see Rotimi, *Kurunmi* (Ibadan, 1971).

¹⁰Blair, *Report*.

clear case of anarchy, life and society in Abeokuta during this period was one of uncertainties, without any clear system of political or social order. It was in this condition of cultural confusion that the *Iwe Iroyin* was established and operated in Abeokuta.

IV

Henry Townsend's press and pioneering experiment was certainly not the first printing venture in the area that was to become Nigeria. The first printing house had been established in Calabar in 1846, and by 1850 printed materials from Calabar and Sierra Leone was already common on the west African coast. There were of course printed materials from Europe and from the Cuban and Brazilian settlers as well. Some of the local languages had been reduced to writing; the Yoruba bible had been written by 1848 by Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Many printed materials had already made their way into the interior as a result of missionary activities, including the famous Niger expedition. There are claims that these other presses may have attempted to produce newspapers.¹¹ However, the *Iwe Iroyin* was the first breakthrough in sustained newspaper publishing in Nigeria.

The staffs of the *Iwe Iroyin* were initially Europeans, and one can presume that Henry Townsend was its editor until 1861, when he was recalled "home for consultation."¹² The staff may also have included some Creoles, although there was a frosty relationship between the Creoles and the missionaries.¹³ Certainly, Townsend recruited some African apprentices. Most of these apprentices were products of the Mission school and the Technical Institute that the CMS had established. J. F. Ajayi records the case of a particular apprentice who so excelled that Townsend planned to send him to England for further studies.¹⁴ Interestingly, Townsend feared that the boy would be "spoilt" if he got to England. Whether the boy made it to London is not clear, although Increase Coker argued that by 1865 the *Iwe Iroyin* had a black local editor.¹⁵

¹¹Frank Ugboajah, "Developing a New Perspective of West African Media History" in *Mass Communication, Culture and Society* (Lagos, 1981), 57.

¹²Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, 156n.

¹³The relationship between the Creoles and the missionaries was a carryover from Sierra Leone. The differences were to erupt in the 1860s, when the Creoles led by "Irreversible" Johnson became prominent in Abeokuta, where they formed a government, E.U.B.M, which championed the Egba contentions against the Lagos government. The Creoles were also involved in the *Ifole*. See R. S. Smith, *The Lagos Consulate 1851-1861* (London, 1976), 105-06.

¹⁴Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, 193.

¹⁵Coker, *Landmarks*, 12.

The *Iwe Iroyin* appeared in four pages of Yoruba language until 1865, when an English supplement was introduced. The paper was more a Christian newsreel than a newspaper, at least if compared to our modern conception of a newspaper. Indeed, it creates the erroneous impression that there were only a few Muslims in Abeokuta, when Islam was already well-established and had become very involved in the politics of the city. The *Iwe Iroyin* noted that “a few Mohammedans as they are called” lived in Abeokuta.¹⁶ A section of the paper was devoted to Church news, which recorded and advertised clergy movements and transfers, sermons, missionary visits, baptisms, ordinations, births, and deaths.

While this took much space in each paper edition, the *Iwe Iroyin*’s greater contribution is as a historiographical source for the momentous events in Abeokuta, Lagos, and other parts of Yorubaland. The paper captured some of the battles of the Yoruba civil war, the British annexation of the Lagos and the deep fears this produced in Abeokuta and Ibadan, which were to define the complexities of Anglo-Egba relations; and the Egba-Dahomey wars. It is to this newspaper that Nigeria historians owe much of the knowledge of the internal dynamics of Egba politics. The paper adequately captured the sense of confusion that prevailed in Abeokuta as a result of the cultural dislocations and those caused by European modernization.

Much more than this, the *Iwe Iroyin* became the source of learning and information both for the missionaries and the increasing number of mission school graduates in Lagos and Abeokuta. It provided the answers to the burgeoning questions of the evolving intellectuals and society at large on events around them, their cosmology, geography, etc. There were regular articles on history, culture, and geography. Townsend showed particular interest in these articles, as he expressed his deep concern to educate the local people. Foreign news was mainly European, and was obtained from travelers, traders, and sailors on the coast. The CMS headquarters in London also “sent periodicals and journals to the Yoruba mission.”¹⁷ There was also a regular flow of missionaries going on or returning from leave. In reality, however, the news and articles focused on bringing Britain closer to its would-be subjects. An anticolonial analyst might argue that the articles were part of the racial and colonial construct of the African mind.

The *Iwe Iroyin* also provided important economic news and information to its readers. The paper effectively monitored trade on the coast. At

¹⁶*Iwe Iroyin* (20 December 1861), National Archives, Ibadan.

¹⁷*Iwe Iroyin* (25 October 1861), acknowledged receipt of some journals from London.

least once a month an edition carried a table of the rates and values of products traded in Abeokuta and on the trade coasts. Such news allowed the European and African traders to monitor trade, and to know what was most in demand, what to trade in, and what to produce. The following were the rates recorded in the *Iwe Iroyin* of 25 October 1861.

Slaves	12 - 14 pound or 30 strings or 20 slave heads
Palm Oil	10 slave heads for 10 gallons
Palmnut Oil	6 slave heads for 10 gallons
Cotton	6 - 7 strings per bale
Elephant Tusks and Valueless (Extinct) Ivory	
Labour wages	12,000 cowries per annum

Egba traders, Creoles, and missionaries were not unaware of the international economy, thanks to the *Iwe Iroyin*. The effect of the American civil war on its cotton production were announced much earlier than it was felt. Insightful traders encouraged the production of more cotton in these years such that "Egba cotton, though small in itself... attained some prominence in English market."¹⁸ Model farms based on Townsend's and Buxton's ideas and allied industries were developed. The CMS industrial institute and the Creole establishment tried to enhance Egba exports by adding some industrial values. By 1861 there were already about 300 cotton gins in Abeokuta.¹⁹ Pushed by the missionaries, and probably encouraged by the reports of the newspaper, the Alake introduced coin currency to facilitate trade in Abeokuta.²⁰

An impressionist column was regularly published in the *Iwe Iroyin*. In these columns, missionaries reveled in the hospitality of the Egbas. Many years after, Townsend was to remember "a time when a white face was passport in Abeokuta."²¹ Missionaries described Abeokuta with many accolades in their writings. Some of these are: "the Sunshine in the tropics," "The London of Africa," "The Royal city," etc. In 1864, when the Egba defeated Dahomey, the victory was widely celebrated, with writers wishing that British forces would "lick" Prussia like the Egbas had "licked" Dahomey. The good impression that the missionaries had of Abeokuta, the hospitality of the people, and the fast pace of development there made them push the Lagos Colony and the British Home Office to pursue an

¹⁸ Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, 167.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Iwe Iroyin* (25 October 1861).

²¹ Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, 94.

Abeokutan policy, by which the city would be made the example of “native advancement.”²² This development was later to place the Egba in good stead during the scramble and colonial conquests. As a result the Egba were not attacked and maintained their independence until 1914.

V

It is impossible to gauge the impact of the *Iwe Iroyin* on the Egba. Was the paper able to achieve any significant measure of reculturation on the Egba people? Did it contribute in a significant way to the process through which the Egba solved their problems of cultural confusion? Suffice it that the impact of the newspaper on the Egba and the resolution of their cultural dilemma were acknowledged by the Egba people themselves.²³ The paper was very popular among the people, and has assumed folkloric status. The contributions of the *Iwe Iroyin* cannot be divorced from the whole spectrum of European cultural penetration of Africa. The totality of European cultural influences and their interplay with local traditional forces helped to produce what the Egbas became afterwards. The people now pride themselves with being the gateway to modernization for the whole of the Nigerian state. As a pioneering media experiment, the paper contributed immensely to the history of newspaper publishing in Nigeria. It is no coincidence that, although no other newspaper developed in Abeokuta until the 1920s, many of those who established and worked in the Lagos newspapers were Egbas.²⁴ In Abeokuta itself printing became a cultural vocation. The street on which the *Iwe Iroyin* was published remains a major vocational center for printing.

VI

Cultural influences do not occur in one direction. The environment in which the paper operated also defined its nature and operations. Indeed, the *Iwe Iroyin* survived as long as it could cope with the demanding and opposing forces in Abeokuta. In other words, its destiny became tied to the cultural resolution of the Egba dilemma. The same forces that made

²²Smith, *Lagos Consulate*, 112.

²³Copies of the paper were kept at the Ake Palace Archives until it was burned in 1993. Various nostalgic references are made to Townsend and the *Iwe Iroyin* in Egba publications and public statements.

²⁴Most of the popular names in Nigeria's media history of the pioneering years are Egba. See Babatunde Oduntan, “The Development and Impact of Newspapers in Abeokuta 1859-1960” (B.A. Long Essay, Ogun State University), 46.

the newspaper so valuable were also to determine its destruction. By 1867 the paper had ceased publishing.

It does not appear that the newspaper made enough money to be self-sustaining. The paper sold for 120 cowries. As the readership was scant, the mission would have had to subsidize its operations. Indeed, the salaries of missionaries were paid directly from London annually. Part of this might have been committed to the publications. It is noteworthy that Townsend was paid more than other missionaries and the following sums were designated payments for expenses incurred.

C148.1523	January 1866
C208.1123	July 23 1866
C55.18.223	February 1866 ²⁵

These monies could have been for the use of the vocational institute, the mission schools, and the newspaper, but the newspaper could not survive for long as a business venture on the subvention from London alone.

The fluctuating fortunes of Anglo-Egba relations between 1864 and 1867 had profound effects on the missionaries and their ventures in Abeokuta. The annexation of Lagos as a Crown Colony in 1861, and the appointment of a Consul with a supporting military force, made Lagos a safer place than it had been. The security that the Egba provided for the missionaries and the Creoles was now better provided by Lagos and was itself jeopardized by continuous warfare, which the Egbas engaged in. For instance, in the Ijaiye War, Dahomey and Egbado campaigns adversely affected economic and evangelizing interests of the merchants and the missionaries. Although Dahomey had been contained, it remained a very present danger to destroy Abeokuta. This situation encouraged many of the missionaries and traders to move to Lagos.

In the same vein, many settlers and Egbas themselves felt that after Lagos, Abeokuta was the next obvious target for British imperialism. The prospect of war with Lagos was enough to frighten more settlers away from Abeokuta, especially those who could remember the devastation from the bombardment of Lagos in 1851. Lagos seemed to have reasons to attack Abeokuta. The Egba wars had disrupted trade and communications with the interior. The postal service to the interior had become unsafe and irregular.²⁶ As it was essential for Europeans and Creoles to

²⁵Dawes, secretary, to Yoruba Mission, CMS Papers, National Archives, Ibadan.

²⁶Robert Smith, "Nigeria-Ijebu" in Michael Crowther, *West African Resistance* (London, 1971), 175.

maintain regular contact with Lagos for news and messages in Europe, many simply moved to Lagos. This mass movement eliminated the readership of the *Iwe Iroyin* in Abeokuta, and ultimately the quality of the staff that produced the paper. The immediate event that led to the collapse of the newspaper was the Ifole, the expulsion of the missionaries and Christians by the Egba people themselves. The event was the culmination of the political interplay between the Egba government, the Lagos Consul, and the missionaries, as well as the fears, anxieties, expectations, and disappointments that these relations produced.

The period was one of strained relations between Europeans and Africans. In the 1860s the advances that were to culminate in the scramble for and partition of Africa were already underway. The British bombardment (1851) and annexation (1861) of Lagos sent a clear signal of British interests to the states close to the coast. As a result all Europeans were viewed with suspicion. Building strong and unusually large structures was an obvious source of fear. In 1864 Townsend built the first stone building in Abeokuta, and between that period and 1867, when more such buildings were constructed, the Egbas were convinced that the missionaries were building forts to be equipped with arms to support the imminent British attack on Abeokuta.²⁷ Such suspicions caused persistent conflict between the Egba and the Europeans.

There were also disagreements bordering on the parallels between the traditional religions and Christianity. For instance, the animist families of Christian converts often insisted that their bodies be buried in the customary way, and the insistence of the missions on Christian burials naturally produced conflicts. The Egbas also felt that the missionaries were helping the Lagos government to undermine their middlemen trade positions. In June 1867 a popular uprising expelled all Europeans from Abeokuta. Many Christian converts fled with the missionaries to Lagos.

Yet another dimension exists to the demise of the *Iwe Iroyin*. Fatimah Alliu has contended that Rev. Townsend was in fact commanded to cease publication of the paper by the CMS headquarters in London. According to her, the *Iwe Iroyin* had become Townsend's chief weapon in his ambitious political propaganda and shrewd maneuvering for power in Egba-land and England, so much so that the Colonial Office had accused him of "aggravating the problems of British foreign policy."²⁸ Indeed, there was regular disagreement between the missionaries at Abeokuta and the

²⁷ Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, 142.

²⁸ F. F. Alliu, "Press Politics and the Nigerian Government" (Diploma Project, Ogun State Polytechnic, 1988), 20.

Lagos government over what should be the British attitude to the Egba. The missionaries pushed an Abeokutan policy, by which the city would be made a model of British civilization in the region. In line with this policy, the missionaries acquired British support for the Egbas in their wars against Dahomey. However, successive Lagos governors saw Abeokuta—and indeed the missionaries—as obstructing British commercial and political advances into the Yoruba hinterland.

VII

The sacking of European property marked the effective end of the *Iwe Iroyin* in Abeokuta. By 1867, however, there was a marked improvement in the political organization of the Egba state. The seed of Christianity having been sown, Abeokuta developed a complex interaction between the traditional animist religions, Christianity, and Islam. For instance, all religions were represented in the hierarchy of chieftaincies.²⁹ A culture based on an admixture of European influences and traditions has distinguished the Egbas from neighboring peoples. While it is not possible to pinpoint with clarity the impact of the *Iwe Iroyin*, the paper represented the spearhead for the spread of European ideas and the management of Egba affairs that were needed for the understanding and resolution of the cultural confusion that the Egba confronted in the mid-nineteenth century.

Still, it is important that the impact of the *Iwe Iroyin* be not overemphasized. The readership was sparse. Coker estimates that there were probably no more than 300 daily readers. However, such was the impact of the missionaries on Egba society in these few years that virtually every major development, including the choosing of kings, showed missionary influence. The *Iwe Iroyin* was the anchor of that Egba enlightenment program. It is significant that British text, except for primers, were not used for teaching in the nascent Egba schools. A source admitted that by 1920 newspapers were an important part of the reading curriculum of schools and colleges in Abeokuta.³⁰ The source also noted that many Egbas who did not attend formal schools did read newspapers.

Iwe Iroyin has been criticized as being unduly concerned with European and specifically British interest in its reportage. To this extent, Omu argued that the *Iwe Iroyin* does not qualify as a Nigerian newspaper because it was not written by Nigerians or for Nigerians.³¹ This line cannot

²⁹See various Minutes of Meetings of Egba Native Council, National Archives, Abeokuta.

³⁰Interview with Chief S. Adegbenro Quadri, 4 May 1990.

³¹Fred Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria* (London, 1976).

be sustained. We know, for instance, that the paper was accused on more than one occasion of acting contrary to British interests. It is significant that the *Iwe Iroyin* editorialized that the Alake should pursue his friendship with the French to counter the British monopoly.³² Moreover, the paper was written for the most part in Yoruba, suggesting that it was intended for Yoruba and Egba audiences. Neither can the argument that it prepared the way for British imperialism be sustained. On the contrary, the paper and the missionaries acted *ultra vires* to British imperial advances into Yorubaland. What may be advanced is that the venture was an idealistic one pursued by Henry Townsend in his idealized admixture of Christian evangelism, British literacy, western civilisation, and his adopted Africanness. There is no doubt that the *Iwe Iroyin* had profound impacts on the Egbas, impacts that have continued to the modern period.

It is significant that since that venture, Abeokuta has not been able to sustain another newspaper. This was hardly for lack of interest or effort. The proximity to Lagos has meant that the Egba readership is well supplied from Lagos, where many newspapers developed from the late nineteenth century. The Lagos factor has continued to be central to the Egba loss of prestige and advancement in education, media, and industrialization.

³²Several editions of the *Iwe Iroyin* in 1863 had articles advising closer Egba relations with the French.