Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion

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Published by University of California Press

Peel, J.D.Y.
Christianity, Islam, and Orisa-Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction.

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The last chapter ended with the assertion that culture is less a reflection of society than a reflexion on history. The contrast between the two Latin forms *reflectio* and *reflexio* allows the expression of a distinction often concealed in English, between the thing made and the process of making it, as in the term “work.” Yet that ambiguity may have its uses, in pointing us to the intimately reciprocal character of the making of culture and history. In so far as Yoruba ethnogenesis was a cultural work, it was mainly achieved through the efforts of those who worked on Yoruba language, religion, and history. It is not surprising that these were the critical areas for such work or that so much pioneer work in all these fields was done by the native agents of the missionary societies, since establishing a standard written form of the language was crucial to Bible translation; understanding the character of “heathenism” was vital to combatting it; and writing local history was a means to incorporate Christianity into it. Here “history” shows a similar ambiguous duality of meaning, as given events or *res gestae* (things done) in the past and as narratives about them. Narrating or re-presenting that past is thus a central part of the self-realization of both culture and society.

The two historians I consider now come from the two West African societies whose cultures and histories were compared in the last chapter. They are the Rev. Samuel Johnson and the Rev. Carl Christian Reindorf, authors, respectively, of the *History of the Yorubas* (hereafter *HY*) and the *History of the Gold Coast and Asante* (hereafter *HGCA*). Both books were completed in the 1890s, and stand as two great monuments, towering over lesser literary efforts like the steeples of the Anglican and the Presbyterian churches in a small Ulster town. They invite comparison with each other, but they are much less alike than seems at first
glance—and hardly anyone is equally familiar with the interior of both edifices. While my knowledge of Johnson and his background is perhaps as thorough as anyone’s, what I know of Reindorf’s work rests on little more than a good day’s reading of HGCA. So this comparison is asymmetrical, with Reindorf mainly used as a foil to Johnson.

Now there are two ways in which we may want to evaluate or assess the work of past historians. The first comes readily to those who work on the same region and period as the historian in question: it focuses on the relationship between the historian and his sources, and examines where he got his information, how reliable it was, and what he did with it. The second is more external, and is less directly concerned with the quest for historical knowledge (at least according to a correspondence theory of truth). Indeed, it is likely to come with a reserve toward historical positivism, as with most literary approaches to historical texts. A supreme example of this is the work of the critic Hayden White, who gives precedence to form over content, to a history’s emplotment or narrative structure over its treatment of source material, and to its related “ideological implications.” Though he comes to it from a different direction, the social anthropologist is likely to find this external approach more congenial, since, being inclined to skepticism about the objective truth value of any proposed version of the past, he characteristically seeks to make it intelligible in terms of its users’ interests and its social function. The justification of this approach is that a historian’s intention, formed from his experiences and his prior notions of what an account of the past might look like and be useful for, must always be prior to his use of the evidence, even though it will surely be modified by his working on it.

Here I take this second line and aim to shed light on the kind of work that Johnson produced by looking at how it was shaped by the concerns and assumptions he brought from his professional life as an African Protestant pastor. “Pastor of Oyo” is how he styles himself on the title page, just as Reindorf appears on his as “Native Pastor of the Basel Mission.” The focus is on the peculiar interests of the native agent of a missionary society, a man to some extent alienated by his Christianity from the mass of his compatriots but identifying with them even as he wished to convert them; and on a mind shaped by the narrative resources of the Bible and of European historical writing as well as by the traditions and uses of the past current among his own people.

THE HISTORIES COMPARED

With its 650 pages of historical narrative (that is, excluding its preliminary essay on the Yoruba language and some appendixes), HY weighs in at nearly 290,000 words, over twice as long as HGCA. In one sense HY has to be regarded as a more
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original book than HGCA. The precedents for what Johnson set out to do were much more limited: apart from some short essays by various authors on Yoruba history, put together from oral materials, that appear in missionary journals, local newspapers, or as modest pamphlets, he virtually created his own genre. His source material was almost entirely oral, whether it was consolidated traditions of the remoter past (some derived from professionals like the Oyo court bards or arokin), informants’ memories and commonly circulating accounts of the more recent past, or Johnson’s own memories and records for the last thirty or so years. He did not have available such published historical accounts by Europeans, going back to the seventeenth century, as provided Reindorf with both information and historiographical models for his own work.

The very existence of these published sources—arising from the long European presence on the Gold Coast—meant that Reindorf’s HGCA both could and had to incorporate much more of the long-term interaction of Africans and Europeans than HY. The latter by contrast is a more purely native history, albeit one seen from that period when the European presence, which had been growing for over forty years, was eventuating in colonial annexation. At the same time, HY is much more immediate to the writer’s present. Whereas HGCA comes to an end in 1856 with the consolidation of British rule on the Gold Coast after the cession of the Danish forts, a generation before Reindorf’s writing, Johnson takes us right up to 1897, the year in which he laid down his pen; and in fact over a third of the entire massive book deals with the last great war among the Yoruba kingdoms (1878–93), in whose closing stages Johnson played an important political role as a mediator. While what he says about Yoruba history from its mythical origins up to the fall of Old Oyo in the 1830s is uniquely indispensable as source material, the chief glory of his history lies in it how it treats the politics of Ibadan, where Johnson lived for most of his life, from midcentury onward. HY is at its greatest as contemporary history, and it is from this feature that we learn most about its general orientation, even in regard to earlier periods.

The point of greatest commonality between HY and HGCA arises from the authors’ value commitments, as native pastors. I use this term pointedly, with its implicit reference to the two sides of their public identity, as Christian professionals and as patriots, members of their own African communities. The relevance of this dual allegiance is signalized in the notably parallel ways in which the two authors bring their narratives to a conclusion. Both abandon historian’s prose for emotionally more charged forms of speech. Johnson expresses his fervent hopes in prayer (HY, 642): But that peace should reign universally, with prosperity and advancement, and that the disjointed units should all be once more welded into one from the Niger to the coast as in the happy days of ABIODUN, . . . that clannish spirit disappear, and above all that Christianity should be the principal religion in the land—paganism
and Mohammedanism having had their full trial—should be the wish and prayer of every true son of Yoruba.

Reindorf, by contrast, breaks into a kind of free verse, invoking Britannia. After celebrating her victory over external enemies, he identifies the two “inner and dangerous” foes that still exist—ignorance and funeral custom—and concludes (HGCA, 341):

To exist, and then to rule, rule at ease,
Is never the spirit of Britannia.
By thee no nation ever was paralysed.
’Tis mission’s duty the gospel to preach,
The government’s, classical education.
One word, and the funeral custom will die,
And all will sing, “Rule, Britannia, Rule.”
Superstition will then flee far way,
And Christianity will rule supreme!

Common to both is the expression of hope that Christianity will triumph and transform the nation. In fact the Christian Bildung of the two men is even closer than may appear, since though Johnson was Anglican, the missionaries who had the greatest impact on him were two of the many Württemberg Pietists (often Basel-trained) whom the Church Missionary Society employed in the nineteenth century. One was David Hinderer, who founded the Ibadan mission and led it between 1851 and 1869, to whom Johnson, “as a former pupil,” dedicated HY. The other was Gottlob Friedrich Bühler, between 1858 and 1864 the principal of the CMS Training Institution at Abeokuta, which Johnson attended from 1862 to 1865. When they are compared with their English colleagues, the Germans stand out for two things: the strongly paternalist but spiritually intimate relationship that they cultivated with their African pupils and staff; and their commitment to a seriously liberal education for Africans. Bühler came into conflict with his senior colleague, the Englishman Henry Townsend, over the latter’s disapproval of overly academic education for men intended as native agents. Bühler’s curriculum gave pride of place to religious subjects—Old and New Testaments, Scripture history, biblical geography, catechism, and the like—but also found room for general history and geography, natural history, and philosophy, along with some Greek and Latin. Reindorf’s view of the complementarity of “the gospel” and “classical education,” even if he looked to the government to provide the latter, expresses very much the same cultural philosophy as Bühler’s curriculum.

Of the differences, some are less significant than others: Reindorf’s dominant note of the British bringing enlightenment can be readily paralleled from elsewhere in Johnson—and in any case Reindorf was writing from within an established colonial order; Johnson, from the edge of one. A much more significant difference has to do with each man’s relationship to his presumed ethnic and national
constituencies. Just as Reindorf is proud of being a Ga and of his descent from the “national officiating high priests in Akra and Christiansborg,” so is Johnson of his being an Oyo or Yoruba proper and descended from Abiodun (d. 1789), the last Alafin of Oyo before its decline. Reindorf also seems sensitive enough about his mulatto descent to insist that, at one point, it was those of mixed blood who “became the protectors and deliverers of their country from its enemies” (HGCA, 97)—an aspect of identity that did not affect Johnson. On the other hand, Johnson, like many of his colleagues, was a repatriate from Sierra Leone, with the burden of slavery and social deracination in his parents’ recent past.

But the link between these received ethnic or communal identities and the wider emergent nations that both men envisaged was more complicated and problematic in Reindorf’s case. The Ga people of Akra (Accra) were not numerous or central enough to be the core of a plausible modern nation; there was also “the principal and important portion of the Gold Coast, Fante, the land of history, the land of poetry and enlightenment and semi-civilization” (HGCA, v), whose early history Reindorf felt he had to leave on one side; and then again there was by far the most impressive indigenous state in the area, the still-independent Asante, which figures somewhat awkwardly in his account both as an ally of Akra and as an oppressor of the Fante. It was plainer for Johnson. The process by which a name applied by the Hausa to the Oyo (“Yoruba”) got expanded to cover a mass of peoples with closely cognate dialects and cultures, dominant in the British colony of Lagos and its large hinterland, was begun by the CMS itself in the 1840s in Sierra Leone. And who could be more fitted than an Oyo pastor, resident for most of his life in Ibadan, the principal successor state to Old Oyo, to write the charter history of this emergent Yoruba nation? Things were as yet uncomplicated by the incorporation of Lagos and the Yoruba into an entity called Nigeria.

This relationship of the historians’ primary ethnic roots (Ga and Oyo, respectively) to what they each saw as the potential nation (Gold Coast and Yoruba, respectively) profoundly shaped the emplotment of both Histories. Because Reindorf took as his collective subject a regional entity, defined originally by European activities and of much linguistic diversity, he plotted his as a universal history of enlightenment and progress working itself out in the Gold Coast. There are traces of other plots, such as the Rev. J. Zimmermann’s scheme of Hamitic migration from the ancient seats of religion and civilization, followed by a “deathlike sleep of more than a thousand years,” and finally the renewed call for Africa to rejoin “the history of the world” (HGCA, 1). And Middle Eastern, especially Jewish, origins had other, more specific uses: they could be used to back up such claims as that “no African nation or tribe [is] ever known to have so advanced in their religious views as the Akras” (HGCA, 6). But in the main, after an opening that gives us the Bevölkerung of the Gold Coast and early visitors from outside, HGCA presents a continuous history, with some ups and downs, but still with the overall impression of an upward
movement. This effect is chiefly achieved by there being three (out of the 29) chapters that are thematic rather than segments of the chronological sequence that structures the work as a whole. The first (chapter 8) is a remarkable comparison of Tshi (Akan) and Akra (Ga) political forms, in terms partly of an antithesis between despotic and patriarchal government,” partly of a developmental sequence from prophet to priest to king (which surely derives from the Scripture history of mission training); and it urges on “the educated community [the need] to reorganize the whole structure of government on Christian principles, before we shall be acknowledged as a nation” (HGCA, 117). The second (chapter 19), interpolated in the main narrative sequence at the 1820s, covers the whole history of education and the missions from 1720 to 1890. The third (chapter 22), interpolated at the 1830s, deals with agriculture and runs the whole historical span from the time of Adam, through early farming on the Gold Coast, the new crops introduced by Europeans, problems of agricultural production, and finally “What the Government Should Do to Get the Colony Prosperous.” It looks as if Reindorf found it impossible to work up most of his material in his preferred mode, as a story of progressive development, so he left it in a relatively unplotted chronicle form; but he provided the three chapters that, by each treating an aspect of long-term cultural change, could serve as hermeneutic keys to the whole, an invitation to the reader to discern steady progress even through the vicissitudes of wars and political history.

If the emplotment of Johnson’s HY is more finely integrated, this fundamentally depends on his having a more amenable collective subject, the Oyo-to-Yoruba nation. Johnson was as committed to progress and Christian enlightenment as Reindorf, but he was able to combine it with the contrasting theme of restoration. This theme, entirely absent from the exordium of Reindorf’s History, is given great prominence in Johnson’s: British rule will bring not only modern advancement but also the welding together of the “disjointed units . . . as in the happy days of ABIODUN.” This combination of recursion with progression is deeply set into the narrative structure of HY. The thirty-five chapters of HY are divided into two parts: part I, which presents an ethnographic introduction (140 pages, with another 55 mostly on the language), and part II, which is the history itself. Such an extensive ethnography gives a very strong definition to the Yoruba collective subject of the narrative to come. Part II is divided into four periods: of these the first (a mere 12 pages) and the second (a further 32 pages) may be taken together as covering the history of Old Oyo up to its culmination with the peaceful and prosperous reign of Alafin Abiodun; the third period (95 pages) covers the decline, disintegration, and eventual collapse of Oyo (ca. 1789–1836) through the joint agency of weak and incompetent rulers, disloyal subjects within, and ruthless enemies without, notably the Fulani jihadists; and the fourth (374 pages) presents the turbulent history of the mid- to late nineteenth century as a restoration, which Johnson saw as beginning with the growth of Ibadan (which stopped the Fulani tide) and hoped to see
continued under British rule. So although *HY* is very unevenly weighted toward the fourth period, its narrative is clearly plotted in three stages, as the growth, decline, and recovery of a single nation.

Johnson's ideological coup was the persuasive alignment of Yoruba and Christian destinies, by means of a great romance of national redemption.\(^\text{12}\) Since the notion of a redemptive history is a profoundly Christian one, we may say that *HY* offers a content of Yoruba experience organized within a Christian form. It is worth noting that, in contrast to Reindorf's devoting one of his thematic chapters to them, Johnson makes relatively few and passing references to the establishment and activities of the missions themselves. His Christianity makes itself felt in the more diffuse and profound way of how *HY* is emplotted. Michel Doortmont has made a case for Johnson's classicism, even suggesting that we should view *HY* as a Greek history, consciously modeled on the work of Xenophon in particular, who was in the Bühler curriculum.\(^\text{13}\) This is not very persuasive. The few explicit references to the Greeks strike me as being essentially decorative in nature, classical grace notes like such baptismal names as Claudius, Pythagoras, and Zenobia, which were popular at the time with the Christian elite.\(^\text{14}\) The similarities that Doortmont sees between Johnson's *HY* and Xenophon's *Hellenica* are either commonplace or likely to be fortuitous (e.g., both men wrote about their people's internecine wars, were participant observers of them, accepted the reality of divine intervention in human affairs, were interested in the portrayal of character, etc.). But however much of the *Hellenica* Johnson may have read with Bühler—and actually there is no direct evidence that he read any—it would have been of minimal importance compared to the Scripture history and Bible study that was the staple of his education. We know that Bühler had his pupils learning New Testament stories by heart; and at the end of a course on the Old Testament he wrote of his uplift at “their attention, their interest and their astonishment about the wonderful ways and dealings of God with Israel and the nations who came into contact with them and the whole plan of God for the redemption of the world.”\(^\text{15}\) The Bible in the King James Version, in which Johnson was saturated, and which he must have read virtually every day of his adult life, was incomparably the most important external literary influence on his historical thought.

**THE EVANGELIST BECOMES A HISTORIAN**

To appreciate the experiential ground of Johnson's historical work, we need to turn to the invaluable record of his and his fellows' daily thoughts and activities, and through them of so much of the life of the community at large, that is provided in the journal extracts that CMS agents were required to send back to the mission's headquarters in London. Johnson's first journal is dated 1870, when he was a young schoolmaster, 24 years old. In hesitant, immature prose he records his weekly sorties in Ibadan, after taking Sunday school, to preach under an *ọdan* tree. His superior, Daniel Olubi,
reported of him that “often he came home with almost the words of the disciple, ‘And the Seventy returned with joy saying, Lord, even the devils are subject to us through thy name.’” On the evidence of his own journals, Johnson was highly combative in these encounters, showing little tenderness toward the pieties of his pagan auditors. At the same time, he early shows an interest in their history and an awareness of the importance of history to them: in his first journal he tells us of the settlers in Ibadan from the destroyed town of Ikoyi—even though he gets the date of its destruction much too early—with the ex-king they had honored in their locality.

We cannot but read Johnson’s early journals for signs of the great History to come. At the outset they are far from unique, since the journals of several other African agents contain references to history, both in the past and in the current life of Yoruba towns, and to manifestations of local culture. Of course, because Johnson did write his history, we can sometimes identify in his journals passages that were later drawn on directly in HY, among the most remarkable of them one that tells of a man’s near-death experience in which he had a revelation of the gods. In fact we get the first real foretaste of Johnson’s destiny as a historian not in his occasional references to past events but in the detail and zest of his narratives of political conflict in contemporary Ibadan, where we can compare him directly with his colleagues Olubi, Allen, and Okuseinde. Already in 1874 he gives us the most detailed blow-by-blow account, some of it eyewitness, of the downfall and murder of Efunsetan (the Iyalode or senior female chief), and by 1877 his handling of the civil disturbances round the downfalls of two other chiefs, Aiyejenku and Iyapo, is even more fluent, expansive, and assured.

From the late 1870s too, Johnson’s journals start to offer more historical amplification of his experiences, as if he was now continuously aware of the traces of the past in his routines of the present:

In July 1879 while out and about in Ibadan, he meets a middle-aged man, who greets him cordially. The man says he is an Agberi, and to Johnson’s account of himself, replies: “I hold my communion directly with the invisible beings and I am too enlightened to be taught by you. . . . I am a diviner and can show you Sango, Oya, the maker [Obatala] and your own guardian angel [Ori]. . . .” Johnson emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus, and how we cannot know the future, but only how to live and the future state after this life. He preaches a whole account of “Jesus and Him crucified.” The man prostrates and says he’ll come to hear more.

While there are dozens of reports of evangelistic encounters in the CMS journals that are rounded off something like this, Johnson goes on to tell us something about the Agberi:

“a tribe living to the east of Oyo, and . . . regarded as great doctors and charmers. Before the destruction of Oyo, they were the King’s doctors and instruments of evil. . . .” He would use them if he wanted to kill a powerful chief, and for their skills they were held “in slavish veneration.”
About this time Johnson starts to travel more widely, especially to the east of Yorubaland, which was never under Oyo rule, and he acquires a sharper sense of regional variety and local history. He does not lack confidence in his judgments, made against a cultural standard provided by the Oyo: Yoruba civility required that people lived in towns (ìlú) and had a king (ọba). So in 1880 he describes the Ikale, a Yoruba subgroup who lived toward the creeks in the far southeast, as:

a set of people still inferior to the Ondos [a kingdom of the southeast] in intellect and mode of life. They are a half naked, greasy bodied, dirty and covetous people, occupying a vast portion of land, but living in thickets without any regular town. Each village consists of a family or families and the headman is their chief. . . . No sign of royalty to distinguish them, they are all in their primitive state.

By 1882 he had started occasional diplomatic service with the governor of Lagos to end the war. As he passes through Modakeke on his way northeast to the war camp of Kiriji, where the armies of Ibadan and the Ekitiparapo faced each other, he gives a potted history of the origins of the Ife-Modakeke quarrel, though again his dating is loose (“about the commencement of the 18th century [surely he meant the 19th] when the Yoruba kingdom was destroyed”). I suspect that the great project of the history may have crystallized in his mind about now—he must have been stimulated by what he learned of the antecedents of the bitter interstate rivalries expressed at Kiriji. In November 1882, news of an insurrection against the reigning Alafin Adeyemi at Oyo led him to comment that “in this country as in [a] civilised country the person of the king . . . [is] sacred,” so if a king is rejected, it is a message from the people that he must kill himself; and he mentions the precedent of the death of Abiodun’s successor Aole, the Alafin at Old Oyo under whom the decline began. A week later he has an argument with some Muslims in Ibadan about the religious authority of the Koran. When one of the Muslims says Mohammed proved he was a prophet by giving an account of five generations before his birth, Johnson ripostes: “I can now tell you the names and histories of the kings of Yoruba since it was kingdom, generations before King Abiodun, am I therefore a prophet?” It is from this point that we can be pretty sure that Johnson was working on the History.

YORUBA EXPERIENCES, BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Johnson’s maturation as a historian took place against the background of near-continuous evangelistic and pastoral practice (except for the periods in 1882–84 and 1886–87 when he was on diplomatic business). So how was doing history relevant to that? History among the Yoruba may be seen as grounded in two contrasting forms (which, however, also touched and sometimes merged with each other): tradition and memory. By “tradition” I mean those socially consolidated versions of the past, and particularly accounts of the origins of institutions, that served to
define communities and underwrite authority in them. By “memory” I mean those traces of past experience present in the consciousness of every human being that provided the essential but problematic basis for the sense of personal identity, as well as the constraining or enabling basis for future action. Tradition is social and hierarchical; memory is individual and open-access. In mid- to late nineteenth-century Yorubaland the break point between the two was largely associated with the collapse of Old Oyo and its knock-on effects. Hence references to the two key figures of this transition—Abiodun, the Alafin of Oyo at its apogee, and Afonja, the ruler of Ilorin whose alliance with the Fulani led to Oyo’s final destruction in the 1830s—were commonplace in popular historical discourse and thence taken up by Johnson. In 1876, he mentions a female baptismal candidate over seventy years old, allegedly born about 1800 in the reign of Abiodun, “whom Mungo Park knew.” As late as 1883 there died a parishioner of Olubi’s, an old lady so full of years that she had seen eleven kings of Yoruba crowned. Tradition and personal memory thus took on another contrast: the former was idealized as past order whereas the latter was full of the experiences of warfare, dislocation, enslavement, loss of kin, and so forth. David Hinderer commented, in a report of a journey through the region of the old Egba towns, destroyed in the wars of the 1820s, that a book of touching interest might be written from the tales that his Yoruba companions told of them. The recent past, the past of memory, was characterized by Yoruba as an “Age of Confusion,” a time under the sway of Esu, the trickster deity.

The aim of any mission is to insert itself into the ongoing history of the evangelized people and so to transform it. With successful missions a complex mutual adaptation nearly always occurs, in which Christianity is seen as fulfilling or conforming with key elements of local culture even as it challenges or rejects others. To appropriate and rework local versions of the past so as to legitimate the new religion is a critical aspect of this process. It is also a highly assertive act, for it insists both that the Christians belong to local society and that their leaders have authority. The clash of rival authority claims was very evident in Johnson’s encounters with the Agberi diviner and the argumentative Muslim that I have already noted. But the very real epistemological issues were never more clearly expressed than in an exchange with a Sango devotee, who responded to Johnson’s preaching by demanding to know “How could you know God’s mind?” Johnson continues his account:

I replied it was revealed in Christ His blessed son 1800 years ago. He interrupted me by saying, “What a liar! Were you then born? How do you want to believe on Him whom you have not seen?” I replied, “Let me answer your question by another. Was Abiodun really a king of Yoruba?” “Why, decidedly,” he replied, “Who knows not that?” “But were you then born?” I asked again. “No,” he replied. I then said, “How then do you want me to believe him to have lived and reigned whom you have not seen?” He replied, “Eyewitnesses over whom he reigned are living testimonies who
testified the same to us.” “Even so,” I rejoined, “Eye and ear witnesses have handed it down in writing of all that Jesus did and taught on earth.” He dropped the conversation and asked for rum.

Here speaks someone who placed the verification of Yoruba and of Christian history within a single cognitive framework, with the figure of Abiodun providing a critical point of common reference between him and his interlocutor.

In the battle against heathenism, Johnson was quite prepared to use his acquired knowledge of history (qua tradition) against those who owned it. In particular, he argued that the histories of oriṣa (deities) showed that they were merely deified men, unscrupulously elevated to the status of gods by their priests—a strategy especially useful in the case of the Christians’ worst bugbear, Sango, the thunder god, who was reputedly an early Alafin of Oyo. The great occasion when this argument was deployed was when the mission house was itself struck by lightning in 1883—Johnson himself narrowly missed being killed—and a large crowd of Sango worshippers surrounded the house to demand the usual heavy fines and to carry out the appropriate rituals of appeasement. The Christians refused to comply, and an angry confrontation ensued, but the Sango people were repulsed. In the next few days, as many visitors flocked to the mission house, Johnson challenged the cult by explaining the nature of electricity and divulging Sango’s history: “The history of Sango are [sic] only known to the Priests and this the common people were also made to know, and the cruel deceits of the Priests exposed by us to their shame.”

In contrast to this polemical euhemerism, the Christians also sought to associate themselves with the best of Yoruba tradition. In 1898 the elderly Daniel Olubi gave a remarkable sermon at the ordination of Johnson’s long-term friend and colleague, F. L. Akiele, taking as his text II Timothy 2:1, “Then therefore, my child, be strong in the grace of Christ Jesus.”

Olubi gave the Èsọ, the elite of military chiefs at Old Oyo, sometimes called the Alafin’s bodyguard, as the exemplar of the virtues commended to the ordinand. Renowned for their courage, loyalty, endurance and obedience to their royal master, the Èsọ had ever to be braced and ready, always prepared to suffer for the cause, and their dying words to their king must be “I am coming to meet you.” . . . “Your devotion, your obedience, your love must be unquestioning, you cannot prostrate yourself to the world, you cannot suffer yourself to be turned aside from the path of duty, you cannot allow yourself to grow slack, even in your death you will still be your master’s servant.”

This sermon had an electrifying effect on the congregation, whose members perfectly understood the symbolic meaning of the Èsọ. Johnson’s History (completed the previous year) shows us why: it quotes sayings still current that celebrated the honor and staunchness of the Èsọ and emphasizes the pride people
still felt in being descended from one (HY, 73–74). Olubi’s sermon and Johnson’s History may well be taken together as documents that mark a certain moment in the inculturation of Christianity by the Yoruba. The Christians in Ibadan had long been regarded as “a quiet people, averse to fame and worldly honour,” and their young men had sometimes been accused of being cowards for their reluctance to enroll as warriors, so this conspicuous endorsement of a military elite indicates a major rhetorical shift. It is significant that the model was a historical one, set back in Old Oyo, while the context of its use was an Ibadan newly under the Pax Britannica. Olubi’s sermon expresses a new confidence in the Christian body, as it felt itself able to move from the margins of society closer to its center and able at last to appropriate something of the values of a past that it once deemed deeply inimical to it.

In contrast to this appropriation of tradition in order to place Christianity within Yoruba history was the appeal to memory, or the personal experience of recent events, in order to give a providential Christian shaping to that history. What Johnson does in HY has its roots in the mundane theodicies through which people sought meaning in the sufferings and successes of their lives. Though only Christianity had the theology for a transcendence of suffering through acceptance (“Thy grace is sufficient”), Yoruba pagans and Christians also shared much common ground: success was read as a sign of divine favor and suffering as a punishment to bring man back again to a proper relationship with God. In 1884 Johnson read a paper at the annual prayer joint meeting of the three Ibadan churches, “enumerating some of the special merits vouchsafed to us as a church during the past year.” The main items were the delivery of the houses of several leading Christians from pillage by the agents of the war chiefs, and the happy outcome of the lightning strike on the mission house, which had ended in the confusion of the Sango people. The converse of this divine favor for God’s people was the retributive justice that Johnson saw in the downfall of Iyapo, one of the ringleaders of the movement against Aiyeyejenku (HY, 410).

The politics of Ibadan were such as virtually to preclude a consistent moral response to them by Christian leaders. In his journal entries for 1874 describing the murder of Efunsetan by her own slaves at the instigation of the head chief, Latosisa the Are-Ona-Kakamfo (leading general of the Oyo army), Johnson leaves the reader in no doubt as to Latosisa’s full involvement. When charged, Latosisa denied it with oaths, “was acquitted to prevent civil war”—and then, with matchless hypocrisy, presided over the assembly that condemned the slaves to death for murder. In an act of necessary diplomacy, the Christian agents (including Johnson) then paid a formal visit to the Are-Ona-Kakamfo to congratulate him for being acquitted and also “to express our feelings of sympathy for the present state of the town.” Johnson records that he “really was shaken” at the instant and ruthless execution of the slaves; and he concludes his narrative by exclaiming, “Whoso
sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed’ Oh! the consequences of sin.” Yet a year or two later he describes Latosisa as “this good chief” and as a “good chief” of “kindly” actions on account of support he had given to members of the Christian body.37 There was realpolitik on both sides to this friendship: Ibadan needed to keep the goodwill of the British in Lagos, and the African agents of the mission counted as oyinbo (Europeans). In the History, with benefit of distance and hindsight, Johnson is able to make a more measured judgment of Latosisa. The moral condemnation of many of his actions is still strongly present, but it is offset, not by facile plaudits for his favors to the Christians but by an understanding of his actions in Yoruba historical terms. Johnson opens his mature account of Latosisa’s move in 1877 to pull down old Chief Aiyejenku by observing (HY, 407):

The Are [Latosisa] now began to evince more and more the characteristics of a Kakanfo. Experience has shown us that a Kakanfo always caused trouble at home and abroad. Their paths were always marked with blood. We have only to recall the history of Afonja of Ilorin, Edun of Gbogun and Ojo Amepo who were rivals, of Kurumi of Ijaye among others; and now Latosisa of Ibadan was on the same track.

So while Johnson judges Latosisa as a Christian, he explains his actions as a Yoruba.

Latosisa encapsulated the whole problem of Ibadan—and by implication of Yoruba culture generally—for the Christians. On the one hand Ibadan was dominated by values and practices deeply antithetical to those of the Christian missions: idolatry, slavery and slave raiding, polygamy, a militaristic ethos fostered by constant warfare, notions of personal worth and achievement diametrically opposed to those of the bourgeois individualism promoted by the missions. Yet at the same time, Johnson felt, there was an objective and overarching sense in which Ibadan was on the same side as Christianity in God’s providential plan for his country. He makes his perspective plain at the close of the chapter dealing with the foundation of Ibadan, where he does not mince words in describing the violence and cruelty of its politics. But he concludes (HY, 245–46):

The moral and social atmosphere of such a place as has been described could easily be imagined. Yet they were destined by God to play a most important part in the history of the Yorubas, to break the Fulani yoke and to save the rest of the country from foreign domination; in short to be a protector as well as scourge in the land. . . . A nation born under such strenuous circumstances cannot but leave the impress of its hardihood and warlike spirit on succeeding generations, and so we find it in Ibadan to this day. It being the Divine prerogative to use whomsoever He will to effect His Divine purpose, God uses a certain nation or individual as the scourge of another nation and when His purposes are fulfilled He casts the scourge away.

Johnson did not initiate this rationalization of Ibadan as a God’s scourge of the Yoruba, for it was a regular part of the moral discourse of the CMS missionaries in
Ibadan. An African catechist, James Barber, had written in 1856 that the Ibadans “are proud of the conquering power which the Lord has lent them for a time [but] . . . they do not know themselves to be nothing but a whip in the hand of God to chastise their fellow sinners.”38 Over twenty years later, Daniel Olubi, travelling through Ondo, quotes a view that the Ibadans were “made as rods by God to correct these nations, and when he pleases to finish with them, there will be an end.”39

The passage quoted above is Johnson’s most central and solemn statement as to the purpose of his History: an attempt to discern the purposes of God operating through the turbulent history of his times and his people, and (as a corollary) to give a secure place to Christianity in that history. He achieves this by plotting his History as a romance, the story of a people’s redemption through its suffering, a story whose outcome would bring both a restoration of the nation and its renewal through the enlightenment of the Gospel. Ibadan and the Christian mission, though mutually opposed in so many ways, by God’s providence combined to offer salvation to the Yoruba nation. The comparison of Johnson with Reindorf from which I began seems to point more clearly to the differences than to the similarity between them. Their contrasting circumstances, which indicated historical problems unique to each of them, meant that this had to be so. But they were both native pastors of their respective churches; and if there is any indication from Johnson as to how we should read Reindorf, it is that we should not overlook how the life of the mission agent engendered the historian40—or, as the Yoruba might put it: *Alufa baba opitan*, “The pastor is the begetter of the historian.”