

Chapter 8. Myths, indigenous culture, and traditions as tools in reconstructing contested histories

The Ife-Modakeke example

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Abstract: Customs and traditions continue to be an invaluable source of information for historians of the African past. A vast amount of information and explanations on complex African issues can be found in these aspects of African culture. This paper deals with the Ife-Modakeke conflict, especially the determination of the main contending issue in the conflict *i.e.* the determination of whether Modakeke was established as a ward in Ile-Ife or a separate town entire of Ile-Ife. It examines the function of Yoruba customs and traditions in the reconstruction of the intention of Ooni Abeweila, the Ife king that established Modakeke, and the various interpretations given his intentions during and after his reign. The paper analyzes the kind of information and explanations cultural practices like Ogun-Pipin, (inheritance sharing), Ile-Mimu (division or sharing of lands among family members), Oko-Yiya (division or sharing of farmland among family members), Ise-Yiya (division or sharing of occupation among family members), etc, could offer when the event that led to the establishment of Modakeke occurred, and in secondary sources, on the Ife-Modakeke conflicts of the later days. Finally, the paper considers the kinds of questions historians must ask in order to make customs and traditions useful tools in explaining, reconstructing, and understanding a people's past.

Introduction

Using the Ife-Modakeke conflict, this paper examines the use of indigenous culture in resolving contested histories. Ile-Ife, the famed cradle of the Yoruba people, has been described as the political, religious and cultural headquarters of Yorubaland (Ade-Ajayi & Akintoye 1980: 281). However, between the 15th and 16th century, the ancient city lost its political power to Old-Oyo and was never able to recover even when

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Old-Oyo fell in the 19th century. Modakeke, as a community, owes its existence to the collapse of the Old-Oyo, especially the internecine wars between other Yoruba communities in their bids to fill the leadership vacuum created by the fall of Old-Oyo (Oguntomisin & Falola 1992: 328). As a people, the Modakeke were the displaced Yoruba-speaking people who fled from the wars and settled in Ile-Ife from 1800. As Samuel Johnson noted, they were initially well-received. Yet no sooner had they settled down when their initial joyful acceptance transformed into open hostilities. The situation was so grave that *Ooni* Abegunle Abeweila, the king of Ile-Ife, physically separated the two peoples: the displaced people were given a place, called Modakeke, and invested one Wingbolu, obviously their leading figure, as the *Ogunsuwa* (Baale) of Modakeke (Oyeniya 2003: 710). The issue came to a head when, in 1846, war broke-out between the Modakeke and their Ife hosts.

The outcome of the 1846 war was grave for the Ife, as they lost the war. Not only were they enslaved by the Modakeke, Ile-Ife was also set on fire. Consequently, Ife people fled among other places to Isoya, Ipetumodu, Araromi, Oke-Igbo (Oguntomisin & Falola 1992: 326). From 1846 when the conflict began to 1999 when the last episode of the conflict played out, inter-group relations between the Ife and Modakeke were characterized by mutual recriminations, open conflicts, and the wanton destruction of lives and property.

Competing explanations have been offered by scholars for the Ife-Modakeke conflict. Samuel Johnson, who pioneered Yoruba study, noted that the *causa belli* was the deposition from Ibadan of Maye Okunade, an Ife-born war veteran and the first Baale of Ibadan, by the Oyo in the camp. Ibadan, another Yoruba town, had existed as a small market-village before the 19th century wars. It however developed into a big city when warriors from different parts of Yorubaland converged on it as a war-camp, especially in their bids to repel the attack of the Fulani Jihadist from Ilorin. Maye Okunade emerged as the head of Ibadan after he successfully led an assault on another Yoruba town Owu. Okunade was described as an irritable terror who derived much pleasure from victimizing and deriding the Oyo as a homeless and disgraceful people. He was given to sudden bursts of anger and violence, most of which were not preceded by any rational thought (Samuel Johnson 1920: 90).

On one occasion, Okunade beheaded a Oyo soldier over a minor squabble the Oyo soldier was having with an Amejiogbe, an Ijebu soldier. Without probing into what had transpired between them, Okunade, in his characteristic manner, beheaded the Oyo soldier who was said to be reprimanding the Amejiogbe over a commonly used ground for refuse disposal. Other Oyo soldiers in the camp, fearing for their lives, ganged-up, fought and expelled Okunade from Ibadan. Attempts to restore Okunade with a coalition between the Ile-Ife and Ijebu ended in a fiasco, since they lost the war and Okunade was killed (Oguntomisin & Falola 1992: 326).

Other accounts of the initial cause of the war were that the Modakeke, owing to their strategic importance in Ile-Ife, had become unruly. They had started behaving as hosts rather than guests. Prior to their arrival, Ile-Ife was said to have had no standing army; hence, the new entrants formed the bulk of its first army (Horton 1973: 125).

In addition, their coming in Ile-Ife put the ancient city on the road to economic prosperity, as the displaced were said to be good farmers and hunters and that the Ife chiefs were fighting among themselves over the displaced people. Realizing their strategic importance, the displaced people became unruly, thereby, warranting a change of attitude by the Ife people (Ade-Ajayi & Akintoye 1980: 286).

More pivotal to the current contestation of the conflict was the need to determine the place of Modakeke in Ile-Ife. On the one hand, as the Modakeke were known to say, it was the intention of the *Ooni* who gave them Modakeke to make them become independent of Ile-Ife. The Ife people, on the other hand, insisted, as they have always done since the death of *Ooni* Abeweila, that the king's intention was for Modakeke to be a ward of Ile-Ife. Inability to decide and agree on this has polarized the two communities and has led to other unresolved issues such as the *Isakole* or rent-payment (between 1920 and 1978) and the local government council headquarters (between 1956 and 1999) (Albert 2001:9).

Faced with these protracted contestations and the absolute lack of records of the king's intentions; how do we reconstruct and determine the place of Modakeke as conceived by the Ife king who established it? Without doubt, the wanton destruction of lives and property that have followed attempts to repel Modakeke's independence by the Ife and Modakeke's refusal to be classified as one of the wards in Ile-Ife would have been avoided if these issues were resolved.

As argued in this paper, indigenous culture, that includes myths, folklore, legends, day-to-day cultural practices which a particular people believe to be true about themselves, the world around them and the general course of events, has an important place in reconstructing contested histories, such as with the Ife-Modakeke conflicts. Indigenous culture is borne-out of real events. They encapsulate a people's historical realities that possess symbolic meanings, which, through regular use, have become transformed and embodied in concrete genres. When such events are carried over from one generation to another, they assume the force of customs, traditions, cultural practices, etc.

One general characteristic of indigenous culture is that it is not formally taught. It is nevertheless well known and adopted by an entire population of a particular area. For instance, among the Yoruba, proverbs, idioms, epigrammatic expressions and their various interpretations, hidden meanings and expressions are mostly not taught, but are generally acquired in the process of growing up. As a normal Yoruba child develops, the child acquires these cultural expressions as integral part of his or her identity as a Yoruba person.

Indigenous culture is both endogenous and exogenous to humans. It develops from people's interactions with themselves as well as with their environment. In so far as these remain inalienable qualities of indigenous culture, it could be regarded as a strategic way in which a people's past is preserved. In other words, myths, traditions, indigenous practices, in so far as they embody a people's way of life, can be regarded as records of their histories. They are therefore a pool of vital resources for historical reconstruction, especially where written or oral testimonies are lacking or are the sub-

ject of controversy.

Sadly, the use of indigenous culture eludes scholars, since the majority of scholars considers indigenous culture as barbaric, unscientific, and therefore should not have any place in historical reconstructions. This is not to say that indigenous cultures and myths have not been used in historical reconstructions, it is however to underscore the fact that their use, so far, have been limited. For instance, earlier in the development of African History, Kenneth Dike, Ade-Ajayi, and others pioneered the use of oral accounts to establish the existence of history in Africa before the colonial intrusion. Even at this time, oral accounts rather than cultural practices as a whole remained the focus. Indigenous culture, like mythology, cultural practices, and oral renditions were never considered as adjuncts to either written sources or archival records. The general practice was to regard anything not found in the records as devoid of any historical value. In the 1960s and the 1970s, after the pioneering efforts of Kenneth Dike (1965), Ade-Ajayi (1965) and others, the use of oral accounts in historical reconstructions have been neglected. This is more obvious in the general trend of undergraduate and graduate long essays, theses and dissertations, which tend to glorify written records in an obtuse manner.

This has had a negative impact on the use of indigenous cultures in developing historical reconstructions, especially in Africa, as the role of historical scholarship in nation-building has receded to the background. Owing to this, most of the histories, so far reconstructed, have become submerged in new controversies. How many of these histories are abound today and are being passed from generation to generation?

No less criticism accompanies the use of oral tradition, myths, and cultural practices in historical writings. Like other human activities, cultural practices are dynamic. This position holds that culture is dynamic and capable of being adapted and interpreted to suit particular purposes. Again, the fact that cultural issues are undocumented, but passed from one generation to another make it susceptible to manipulation, embellishment and other human factors. While not discounting any of these and other arguments on the limitations of the use of culture in historical reconstruction, it must be noted that indigenous culture is systemic in nature. It has both a nucleus and a periphery. More often than not, at the nucleus remains the core of the practice. This core, on the one hand, is unnoticed and hidden to sight. Being thus, the core takes enormous time to yield to changes. On the other hand, the periphery is open and yields to change almost unnoticeably. One way of conceptualizing this process is to view it as a person travelling a long distance with layovers at different points in their journey. As the traveler progresses from one layover point to the other, what he thinks, feels and says about the journey takes on progressively greater historical significance, thus rendering what occasioned the journey in the first place as less important. By the time the wayfarer reaches the end of the journey, the story has taken on a life of its own and the facts of the original event have become almost irrelevant.

In yet another sense, it is not very different from a football match. The ultimate aim is to score goals. However if a goal comes may be a story for another day. Yet on game day, no coach would tolerate a player who left the task of scoring goals

and focused on the task of dribbling others, although one inexorably leads to the other. Understanding the core of any cultural practice would therefore help the researcher understand the primary purpose of the practice. As the various examples used in this study shall show, indigenous culture, like other human phenomenon, can be influenced internally as well as from its environment. For instance, change in any culture could result from its internal mechanisms as well as being a response to external contacts. European contacts in Africa have had long historical roots, but both slavery and colonialism have impacted on Africa in a myriad of ways. Some of the changes wrought by both experiences are both endogenous as well as exogenous.

In relation to the Yoruba, the nineteenth-century Yoruba war not only led to the incorporation of Yoruba nations into the vortex of colonialism, but also affected valued Yoruba cultures and institutions that gave expressions to these cultures. Political control, as a result of the 19th century Yoruba war, changed dramatically. Societies, for the first time in Yorubaland, arose and developed new political arrangements that had no historical roots. A notable example is Ibadan, with its unique socio-political arrangement that saw the emergence of two distinct lines of leadership, one military and the other civil. Another development worth mentioning here is the fact that indigenous practices like among other things, human sacrifices and pawnship gave way as colonial administration instituted rules that considered such practices as obsolete and not amenable to the colonial system. In all these, changes were wrought within the system through internal as well as external factors. In essence, although cultural practices are dynamic, their cores values remain.

Among the Yoruba, as with other groups in Nigeria vis-à-vis Africa, there were and are important cultural practices that characterized the Yoruba world, whether in continental Africa or in the diasporas. These are some of the specific elements that constituted the Yoruba identity and help in sorting out the Yoruba from other groups. They encapsulate and give meaning to the Yoruba world. They are integral parts that cannot be separated from the whole. In everyday living as well as in different other life-forms and expressions, the Yoruba employs indigenous culture as a concise way of giving expression to their views, preferences and interests. As a result, multi-layered meanings and interpretations of these cultures are abound within the Yoruba world. In most cases, these meanings and interpretations are mutually understandable and/or intelligible only to the Yoruba. Hence, as a language of expression, Yoruba is not just a language; it is equally a tool, something like a lens, through which the entire Yoruba world can be viewed.

As the Yoruba are known to say, '*Owe l'esin Oro, Oro l'esin Owe, B'Oro ba sonu, Owe la fi n wa*' (Proverbs are like horses, when words are lost, we ride on proverbs to locate them). The meanings and interpretations associated with this saying are not limited to the occasions in which it was used, but are also associated with a time loop. In the Yoruba corpus, cultural practices, customs, traditions, words, proverbs, idioms and issues have more than the meanings and interpretations imposed on them by the circumstances surrounding them. The Yoruba world imposes both an immediate and future meanings and interpretations on words, proverbs, idioms and events. In

the proverb above, the etymological meaning would read something like: Proverbs are the horses of words, when a word is lost; proverbs help in finding it. Any Yoruba person that offers this as an interpretation and meaning of the proverb is likely to be regarded as '*Omo Enu*,' i.e. one who understands body languages and expressions, as opposed to an '*Omo Oju*,' i.e. those who cannot demonstrate any understanding unless of the spoken words. A rather preferred interpretation would look like: Proverbs are like horses, they help in resolving difficult matters. This negates the popular position that words have no meanings outside the occasions surrounding their usage. To an *Omo Oju*, as against the *Omo Enu*, the interpretation and meaning of the proverb would look like this: Wisdom solves knotty problems. Just as '*Omo*' in the above identity tags is translated as any individual irrespective of age, as against the child that the word connotes, so are Yoruba words, idioms, proverbs, issues, and phenomena, they are capable of different interpretations, meanings and connotations. In most cases, the most obvious meanings and interpretations are not always the intended ones. As Johnson has noted, the Yoruba were fond of ambiguous form of speech making, which, to the untutored, imposes a great danger as Yoruba becomes unintelligible and the process of learning it becomes cumbersome. The difficulty, which non-Yoruba people faced with understanding tangled meanings associated with Yoruba words, applies to both non-Yoruba and Yoruba people also, as not all of them understand the tangled meanings. The richness of the language is underscored by this peculiar characteristic.

In such a tangled web of meanings, interpretations and hidden intentions; how do historians, especially in an age where Western values dominate and demonize the richness associated with other languages, make sense of the Yoruba indigenous culture? Among others, Oyekan Owomoyela (2005) did an interpretative work on Yoruba proverbs. N.A. Fadipe (1970), Karin Barber (1980), and Samuel Johnson (1920) made some effort to copiously document some forms of interpretation and guide, not to the understanding of the Yoruba world, but to understanding some of the cultural practices, customs, tradition, proverbs and idioms collated in their works. Aside from these few works and one or two dictionaries of Yoruba words, no other work is as yet known that could serve as an eye-opener to understanding the Yoruba world. This development owes, in part, to the nature of historical studies inherited from the West, with their emphasis on written records. At another level, the blame could be laid on the threshold of the Yoruba intelligentsia who, in spite of many years of independence, remain attached to the Western academic orthodoxy and its obtuse fascination with written records.

This study is divided into four sections. The first section is this introductory section, which sets out the argument the study pursues. The second section examines Ife-Modakeke conflicts, focusing specifically on the contested issues in the conflict. The third section looks at indigenous culture, as a tool for historical reconstruction, while the fourth section, which concludes the study, applies insights from indigenous culture into the Ife-Modakeke conflict. The study concludes by suggesting that a pragmatic use of indigenous culture interfaced with other research methods, could

serve as a veritable tool for historical reconstruction, especially in contested situations.

The Ife-Modakeke conflict

The Ife-Modakeke conflict remains a vexed issue among Nigerians. Its origins are buried in the internecine war that bedeviled Yorubaland throughout the 19th century. The war arose, in part, from personal conflicts between the *Alaafin* of Oyo and Afonja, Oyo's Field Marshall, at Ilorin. To fortify his position, Afonja invited Alimi, a Fulani cleric from Sokoto, Northern Nigeria to fight Old-Oyo. Before the final show-down with Oyo-Ile, the capital of Old-Oyo, Afonja and his men had sacked all the outlying cities and towns, causing its inhabitants to flee in different directions. A similar fate befell the inhabitants of Oyo-Ile (Ade-Ajayi & Smith 1964: 34).

Eventually, Alimi and his men upstaged and killed Afonja. They finally took over Ilorin; from where they furthered their exploits against Yorubaland. Other Yoruba cities and towns became separated, as they became engrossed with filling the leadership vacuum created by the fall of Old-Oyo. In the ensuing confusion, Yorubaland was decimated by the jihadists and internal rancor among the Yoruba, as one turned on the other in a bloody war that lasted an entire century.

Three groups of refugees resulted from these wars: (a) those who fled as groups, which were made up of whole villages with their kings, chiefs, priests and priestesses and all other aspects of their socio-economic and political administrations; (b) those who fled as individuals; and (c) fleeing soldiers (Oguntomisin & Falola 1992). The first group sought refuge in established towns and villages that were far removed from the war, while the second moved in with their relatives and friends in different cities and towns where they could find refuge. The last group sought to continue the war from other theaters. They congregated around notable soldiers, especially in Ibadan and Ijaye where they established new towns and cities and defended not only these cities and towns but also the entire Yorubaland from the invading Fulani Jihadists.

Ile-Ife, like many other Yoruba communities far-removed from the main theaters of the war, received refugees from the ruins of the Old-Oyo. Mainly, the largest number of refugees received by Ile-Ife was those belonging to the first category. But, unlike in other places such as Ogbomosho, Oshogbo, and Abeokuta where such refugees were given new settlements or allowed to settle separate from their hosts, Ile-Ife admitted the refugees into their different quarters. No specific order was imposed and Ife chiefs and notables were said to be quarrelling with one another over the refugees, as they found them good at farming, hunting and soldiering. As Samuel Johnson had noted, the Ife threw caution to the wind in order to take advantage of their situation.

The refugees initial acceptance soon degenerated and metamorphosed into hostilities as they settled down and began to reject their subordination and 'enslave-

ment' by the Ife. As Johnson (1920: 98) described their situation following this development,

'...they became hewers of wood and drawers of water and were treated no better than... dogs.'

It was owing to this development that Chief Obalaaye of Iraye quarters was saddled with the responsibilities of taking care and controlling the refugees' affairs. Coincidentally, it was during this time Maye Okunade was uprooted from Ibadan by the Oyo soldiers.

These twin developments impacted negatively on the situations of the refugees at Ile-Ife. On the one hand, the expulsion of Okunade was followed by the massive movement of Ife soldiers from Ibadan to Ile-Ife, as they were apprehensive that the Oyo soldiers might avenge Okunade's brutal treatment on them. Their arrival at Ile-Ife had a socio-economic and a psychological impact on both the Ife and the refugees living in their midst. The war had reduced the revenue accruable to Ile-Ife from its satellite towns, since most of them had been abandoned for fear of the jihadists. The refugees who had been providing for Ife had become unruly; thereby threatening the food supply and the economic survival of the ancient town. With increased population, especially of soldiers who were uprooted by the Oyo, the Ife refugees' kinsmen, the Ife people's attitude toward the refugees in their midst changed. They began to be maltreated, sold as slaves, sacrificed to idols, and treated generally no better than dogs.

Attempts by various Ife kings to reverse the situation met with stiff opposition from the Ife people. Three kings were killed by their Ife subjects on account of their 'favourable' dispositions to the refugees. At the height of it all, *Ooni* Abeweila, who was one of the son's of *Ooni* Akinmoyero who had taken the first batch of refugees, gave the refugees a separate settlement outside of the Ife gates, called Modakeke, and invested one Wingbolu, obviously the leader of the refugees, as the (*Baale*) *Ogun-suwa* of Modakeke in 1836. While the intention of the king was to quell the internal trouble through physical separation, his action incensed the Ife against the king. For the refugees, now called the Modakeke, or the Modakeke people, it was a succor to their troubles. As long as Abeweila was alive, he ensured peace, no matter how fragile, between the Ife and the Modakeke. He ordered and built city-fences around Ile-Ife as well as Modakeke. Although Ile-Ife has always had a city-fence, Abeweila nevertheless expanded and widened it beyond what it used to be. For the Modakeke, the city-fence was said to have been built with mud mixed with palm-oil and not water. The city-fence was said to have seven gates (Akanji 2007: 234).

However, the separation of the Modakeke adversely affected Ife's economy, since the Modakeke had formed the core of its agricultural economy. Hence, the Ife, realizing that they could no longer force the Modakeke to work on their farms, became even more incensed against Abeweila and sought every means of killing him. Realizing the precarious state he was in, Abeweila recruited the Modakeke into his palace guards to provide him with security. He reigned for ten years. Eventually he was poisoned by the Ife and died because he separated Modakeke from Ile-Ife.

With the death of Abeweila, the Ife immediately besieged Modakeke in 1846. However, they lost the war. Three months later, another war was waged by the Ife against Modakeke. In this second engagement, the Modakeke won again. However, unlike in the first war where the Modakeke were afraid to enslave their former masters, in the second engagement, they not only enslaved the Ife, but Ile-Ife was also set ablaze and its inhabitants were displaced among other communities to Isoya, Araromi, Oke-Igbo.

After about ten years in exile outside Ile-Ife, Bashorun Ogunmola of Ibadan waded into the conflict, especially because the traditional gods had not been worshiped since the beginning of the conflict in 1846. At the end of Ogunmola's intervention, Ile-Ife became a vassal of Ibadan, and Ibadan imposed a Resident Officer (*Ajele*) on Ile-Ife and Modakeke. To shake-off Ibadan overlordship or colonization, Ile-Ife allied with the Ekitiparapo, a development that incensed Ibadan and caused Ibadan to raise an army to support Modakeke and fight Ile-Ife. Ile-Ife lost and their city was razed to the ground by fire for the second time (Oyeniya 2003).

In their intervention efforts, which began in 1866, the colonial administration became involved in the conflict. They restored the Ife back to Ile-Ife, as well as ordered the dissolution of Modakeke, as requested by the Ife and their Ekitiparapo allies. From the colonial time, through independence up to 1999, recurring conflicts have dominated Ife-Modakeke relations. Among the issues in contention include: the payment of *Isakole* going back to 1921 when the Modakeke were restored to Ile-Ife, this time as a ward in Ile-Ife and not as a separate community; the selection of a separate Imam (Moslem cleric) for Modakeke; the creation of a local government in Modakeke; and the location of local government headquarters.

All through these years, the identity of the Modakeke in Ile-Ife has been a subject of contention. While the Ife were wont to say that Modakeke is a ward like the other 13 wards in Ile-Ife, the Modakeke have come out boldly and argue that Modakeke is a separate entire community of Ile-Ife. During the colonial period, colonial rule treated Modakeke as a ward of Ile-Ife. The post-colonial situation has not significantly changed from the colonial period. Immediately after Nigeria's independence in 1960, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, premier of the Western Region, refused to grant Modakeke a separate local government council claiming that by so doing, the government would be dividing one town – Ife-Ife - into two. It must be noted that Chief Awolowo was the premier of the region while the *Ooni* of Ife, Oba Adesoji Aderemi, was the Governor of the Region.

Between 1979 and 1981, Chief Bola Ige, the Governor of Oyo State, under the party led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), refused to grant Modakeke a separate local government council under the guise that: '*honourable members are expected to pay due and loyal adherence to the Party's standpoints, and stick to them, regardless of their individual predilections*' (Oyeniya 2003). On the December 13th 1983, when Chief Omololu Olunloyo, the new Governor of Oyo State under the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), sent a Bill to the House calling for the creation of a separate local council for Modakeke - Oranmiyan West Local Govern-

ment Council – the Modakeke were joyful. Unfortunately, the military government of General Mohammed Buhari took control of the Federal Government; thereby truncating the dream of an all-inclusive local council for Modakeke.

On May 27th 1989, the Military government of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida announced the creation of 147 local councils, among which was Ife North local council, incorporating Modakeke (wards 1 to 14), Origbo, and Oyere. The headquarters of this new local government council was located at Ipetumodu. To the Modakeke, this was a dream come true. Chief Oladiran Ajayi, the Otun Asiwaju of Modakeke summed up the feelings of his people in the following terms:

‘It is sure that we are in the Promised Land. Agitation, Oppression and Unhealthy rivalry between Modakeke and Ife have been solved after 150 years (1838-1989) of wars and near apartheid in an independent Nigeria. What an uneasy journey of 150 years towards the Promised Land’ (Omosini 1992: 175).

From the above statement, there is no questioning the fact that the most contentious issue in the Ife-Modakeke conflict is the determination of the identity of Modakeke in Ile-Ife. In other words, what was the original intention of *Ooni* Abeweila in establishing Modakeke? Was it for the new settlement to be a separate community, as the Modakeke have claimed or to be a ward in Ile-Ife, as argued by the Ife? Sadly the task of understanding the intention of the king is made the more difficult by the lack of written records. It has proved absolutely impossible to reconstruct the intentions of the king from the various accounts of the two communities, as recurrent wars and conflicts between the two communities are eloquent testimonies to how unhelpful these accounts have been.

Indigenous culture, as noted above, offers a window of opportunity to historians in their bid to decipher whatever contested issues lie before them. In the specific case of the Ife-Modakeke conflict, especially the determination of the intention of the Ife king that established Modakeke, indigenous culture among the Ife and Modakeke offers historians the opportunity to interpret the king’s intention in line with the practices of the period and the exegesis of the time. As it is generally known, kings, chiefs and elders are considered the repository of their community’s culture. Hence, in the next section, the study turns to examining how indigenous culture could help in determining the contested Ife-Modakeke histories.

Indigenous culture as a tool of analysis in the Ife-Modakeke conflict

Even though no written records exist to substantiate the wishes of the *Ooni* Abeweila, there are, however, bodies of laws, customs, culture and practices that could serve as useful insights into knowing the mindset of the monarch regarding his establishment of Modakeke. For example, customs and practices such as ‘*Ile Mimú*’ or ‘*Ile Yiya*’ (separation or creation of separate household) and ‘*Ise Yiya*’ or ‘*Oko Yiya*’ (demarcat-

ing farms or apportioning farms). Here whenever and wherever land, occupation, or properties were divided or separated for whatever reason among individuals and groups, each had unhindered control over their property, land, occupation, etc. and could do with their portion whatever suits their fancy except outright sale (Fadipe 1970: 169-180).

Among the Yoruba, land could be divided among individuals and groups for two reasons: death of parents, especially the father, and when situations warrant that two groups should separate from one another. In the case of the death of the parents, the man's property and wealth is shared among his children, especially his male heirs. The practice is for the most senior male member of the extended family or the family head to call the immediate family of the bereaved and other extended family members together. It is at such meetings that the estate of the departed is shared among his children.

In those cases in which the estate included land and houses, then only the male children inherited the property since it must be kept within the family. If the children of the departed were females, then the land and houses were passed on to other male relatives. On some occasions, females were allowed to inherit houses and land, especially in cases when the male children of the departed were deemed incapable of maintaining the inheritances. In cases where the children were still minors, the male relatives were given the inheritances for safe keeping until the children had grown up to an age when they were capable of directing their own affairs. By and large, the practice was to keep the man's inheritance in the family line. This is called *Ogun Pipin* (Fadipe 1970: 149).

When the need arises to separate two or more people, the process differs from the above. However, on a general scale, it is almost the same as *Ogun Pipin*. In Iresa, one of the ancient Yoruba towns, because the kingship title is preserved in the male-line, a certain king who had a set of twins realized that the choice of who would succeed him might pose serious problems after his death. He therefore divided his territories equally between the two brothers, relocated some of his people and invested one of his twin son's as Aresa of Iresa Apa (Head of Iresa who is fair in complexion) and the other as Aresa of Iresa Adu (Head of Iresa who is dark in complexion). Although each of the towns and their respective heads preserve their corporate independence, they nevertheless regard both their towns and themselves as one. This is called '*Ilu-Yiya*' (Samuel Johnson 1920: 89).

When the relationship between two people or even two communities totters on the brink of collapse, or when land scarcity or an epidemic threatens the corporate existence of a people or a group of people, then the community in pre-colonial Yorubaland, the affected person or persons can resettled on another land or at a different location. This new location is usually called '*Araromi*' meaning I am comfortable here. But in a way, the name actually refers to their plight before coming to the new place. Modakeke was, in the same vein, resettled and named after the noise made by 'a nest of stock, on a large tree near the site' of the town, meaning, 'I am quiet here' or 'I am at peace here.' Some believe that the name came from the pecking on

wood by some birds. This shows the practice of resettlement was common among the Yoruba and it was called '*Ile-Mimu*' or '*Ilu-Mimu*' or '*Ilu-Yiya*' (land apportioning or town / village apportioning).

Like the apprenticeship of a young man which is considered completed upon only when the young man is married and independent, a new community is believed to have been created as soon as it separated from the mother community and a new leader was invested with an office and title to rule over it. In spite of its socio-political independence, the new town, just like the young man, still owes allegiance to the mother community, as a son remains his father's in spite of his independence. Although some variations may exist from one place to another, this practice is also common to all villages and towns in Yorubaland.

Samuel Johnson, commenting on community formation among the Yoruba, intoned:

...perhaps a halting place for refreshments in a long line of march between two towns. In any case it is one individual that first attracts others to the spot; if the site be on the highway to a large town, or in a caravan route, so much the better; the wives of the farmers ever ready to offer refreshments to wearied travelers, who render the spot in time as a recognized halting place, the more distant from a town, the more essential it necessarily must be as a resting place, if a popular resort, a market soon springs up in the place, into which neighbouring farmers bring their wares for sale, and weekly fairs held; market sheds are built all over the place and it became a sort of caravanserai or sleeping place for travelers. As soon as houses begin to spring up and a village or hamlet formed, the necessity for order and control becomes apparent. All Yoruba towns, with very few exceptions are built on this uniform plan, and the origin of most of them is more or less the same, and all have certain identical features (Samuel Johnson 1920: 90).

He explained further that in special cases, like the outbreak of epidemics, conflict situations, and over-population, an influential personage with a large following deliberately built a town, and was from the beginning recognized as its head. He explained that in whatever the case, the new village or town is answerable to the mother town from where it sprang (Samuel Johnson 1920).

In the patrilineal lineage system—*Idile* -, the male child continually stays in his father's employ from the cradle until the day of his marriage. Such a child is considered to be in an apprenticeship under his father; a state he retains until his father considers him old enough to take care of his own family (Fadipe 1970: 68). As a custom, a year or more before this period ends, a dog is usually presented to the young man to take care of. Unknowingly, he is continually watched in his relationship with the dog. The intention behind this present is to note the young man's reactions to the mood-swings of the dog; as if a woman is like a dog that wags his tail at you one moment and barks at you the next moment. If the young man passes this test, a young girl is secretly sought for him and the young man is considered to have completed his apprenticeship the day his father calls him to show him the portion of land that belongs to him from the family farm. He is also given a house or rooms of his own and other basic household and farming items. A week or two after this, a new bride is brought to him to begin his own family. This is called '*Ile-Yiya*' and '*Ise-Yiya*.'

In relation to land and houses, the basic rule among the Yoruba is that, while

they could be transferred from one hand to the other, they must however not be traded away. Almost as a general principle, land, once given, is never taken back except in cases of treason, which renders the grantee an outlaw and the land is confiscated. Even with this, such land must be left untilled once there is a mark of its previous occupation. Should the need arise to employ the land in some form, the entire community must come together to discuss the possibility of seeking out alternatives, if any (Fadipe 1970).

Although land, when given as a gift, is given eternally, barring treason, the grantee is only allowed to plant and harvest food crops and not the tree crops that he may have found already on the land. Inadvertently, grantees are only allowed to plant such crops as meet her or his fancies, but some crops such as palm trees and kola nuts, are regarded as belonging to the landowners unless it was the grantee who planted them. Hence the adage ‘the grantee is to look down not up’ (Fadipe 1970). Land remained the most vexed issue among the Yoruba. In fact the Yoruba can conciliate on all matters except land. This is because land was regarded as the only inheritance that links the living with both the dead and the unborn; hence, efforts must be made to ensure that the family, as well as the state, preserves its land.

Conclusion

Cultural methods such as *Ile-Mimu*, *Ile-Yiya*, *Ise-Yiya*, *Ogun Pipin*, and *Ogun-Jije* are common among the traditional Yoruba communities as a means of wealth redistribution, family recreation, solving the congestion problem of over populated communities, prevention of overt conflict behaviour, and conflict mitigation, among others. When the Ife-Modakeke conflict is viewed from the standpoint of any of these cultural practices, one notices that many of the views expressed by the various commissions of inquiry, politicians, and scholars took no notice of any of these avowed practices in their examination of the conflict.

After considering the representative examples of indigenous practices among the Yoruba above, it is gratifying to note that Modakeke must have been given as a gift, which was not intended to be taken back unless on condition of treason. What is not clear is whether the internal scuffle that necessitated the granting of the land to the displaced people and other development since 1846 in the Ife-Modakeke conflict qualify as treason. There is nothing in oral history to suggest the possibility of this. Commonsense also suggests that if it was bad enough to qualify as treason, the king would not have deemed it fit to grant them such a land in the first place. However, it may be argued that because the king had blood relations with the displaced people, he may not have regarded their actions as treasonous, especially since they supported him. No matter how sound this may be, the fact must still be recognize that if the king did not consider their actions as treasonable, then it cannot possibly be considered treason. This is because treason can only be committed against a sitting head of government; hence, we can conclude that the problem was not bad enough to qualify as

treason. It can also be safely argued that the judgment of the *Imole*, the highest ruling court at Ile-Ife (Oyeniya 2003), that Abeweila erred in granting out the land qualified as treason, as it directly challenges the power of the *Ooni* to distribute and administer land. Hence, it is against the prevailing Yoruba custom to request the land from the Modakeke and to wage war against them in order to achieve this. As one wrong cannot justify another, Modakeke's reaction cannot amount to treason; rather, it qualifies as self-defence.

When these insights from indigenous culture are juxtaposed with others provided, for instance, by archaeology, one gets the impression that *Ooni* Abeweila never intended Modakeke to be a ward under Ife-Ife. Rather, he wanted it to be a separate and an independent town like Ipetumodu and other Ife's satellite towns. To buttress this fact, the king fenced Ile-Ife, Modakeke, and invested the new community with a *Baale*, the *Ogunsuwa* of Modakeke.

The fact that no other ward in Ile-Ife has a wall delimiting it from other areas, renders the argument that Modakeke was meant to be a ward in Ile-Ife is questionable. All evidence, despite their limitations, point to the fact that Modakeke was meant to be like Ipetumodu, Apomu, Ikire, and other satellite towns surrounding Ile-Ife and not a ward dependent on Ile-Ife.

It must be stated that, until this date, government reports, court proceedings, committee and commission reports have consistently argued that Modakeke was meant to be a ward in Ile-Ife and that allowing it to have an independent status is like dividing a town into two. No mention is as yet made as to why other wards in Ile-Ife, during this period, were not fenced and invested with a *Baale* just like Modakeke. Until these substantial differences are accounted for, we may not get near the end of resolving the Ife-Modakeke conflict.

Culture has been defined as a people's total way of life. If this is so, it is incontrovertible that lessons of culture, whatever their inadequacies, are time-tested and must not be ignored. Undoubtedly, African indigenous cultures are rich in two important elements: the tradition of family or neighbourhood negotiation facilitated by elders and the attitude of togetherness in the spirit of humanity. These are two important landmarks that could help in resolving intra-ethnic conflict in Africa. As the case of Ife-Modakeke conflict has shown, conflict resolution efforts must emphasize these two fundamental factors, which are ably represented in indigenous culture, if it is going to relate to the people's world. Indigenous culture evolves from repeated actions and experiences. Therefore, it cannot possibly extend beyond people's cultural milieu. A better understanding of a people's culture will definitely assist in solving knotty issues associated with human or inter-group relations.

As the globalisation sociologist Jonathan Friedman has brilliantly noted, the construction of a history is the construction of a meaningful universe of events and narratives for an individual or a collectively defined subject. How then does one make a meaning out of a past long gone and of which nothing is remembered? Can we construct a meaningful universe or hazard a narrative for a collectively defined subject in a complex web of claims and counter-claims? How can we do any of these where

written records are lacking? As shown with the example of the Ife-Modakeke conflict, cultural practices, myths, and traditions offer strategic ways in which a people's past are unintentionally preserved and offer a picture of former historical realities. Hence, as unintended witnesses, they reflect the historical truth as perceived by the people at the time of the events.

Indigenous cultures are many and multidimensional. How then do historians determine which of the numerous cultures to use for reconstruction? The answer is relevance. The most relevant and the most related of the indigenous cultures should be the guiding post upon which historians should construct their arguments. However, in determining what is relevant in the Ife-Modakeke conflict another problem arises. It must first be determined relevance to what? Is it relevant to the specific issue or subject in question, say the Ife-Modakeke conflict, or the Yoruba wars that serves as the harbingers of displacement or the numerous problems associated with displacement generally? The answer is likely to be found in the subject under examination, the context in which the subject is set, as well as the historians' dexterity in knowing which positions provide better answers to the questions imposed upon the historian by the subject under examination. In determining the intention of Abeweila on the position of Modakeke, the question goes beyond the one imposed by the subject to include wider controversial issues involved in the Ife-Modakeke conflict. Or how do we measure the intention of Abeweila when we already knew he was born of the displaced woman earlier given to *Ooni* Akinmoyero? How do we determine the intention of the Ife when we already know that some other *Oonis* were killed or forced to commit suicide for their friendly relations with the displaced population? These are complex questions can only have equally complex answers. It is in complex situations like this, that indigenous cultures remain the only veritable tool available to historians if they must get answers to complex historical questions.

Students of politics would agree with historians that clearly defined geographical boundaries and power, as encapsulated in a distinct head that is not subordinate to any other power for his/her domestic relations, are some of the criteria of an independent state. In pre-colonial Africa, the idea of the state existed in a somewhat different context than the modern state today. States existed that were independent, but which had filial relations with other states. This situation was not to undermine their existences as corporate entities, but to ascertain reciprocal relationships between the states. Among the Yoruba, the saying is well known that 'Alaafin owns all lands.' But this is not to say that all lands in Yorubaland belongs to the Alaafin of Oyo; rather to underscore the primacy of Alaafin over all Yoruba kings, especially in the Oyo-Yoruba speaking areas.

Given the considerations above, there is no questioning the fact that indigenous culture, although voiceless, could serve in reconstructing events whose truths have long been submerged in contested renditions over time. Cultural practices are, therefore, vital historiographical tools and are chief techniques for remembering the past in a more reliable way. When used in conjunction with other sources, they could help in reconstructing contested histories. Mythology, oral renditions, cultural prac-

tices and other forms of indigenous cultural expressions may be unscientific; they nevertheless hold important truths about a community and a people, their worldviews and their histories.

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