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SACRED KINGSHIP AND GOVERNMENT AMONG THE YORUBA

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INTEREST in African sacred kingship has for long been centred upon its ritual aspects; descriptions of highly colourful ceremonies have provided a convenient introduction to the study of a people's religious beliefs, yielding also examples of the ritual sanctions by which the ruler enforces obedience. As a result the constitutional aspects of kingship have been largely ignored.

Among the best-known West African examples of sacred kings are the oba (*oba*) of the Yoruba kingdoms of Western Nigeria. Though little has so far been published about the rituals of the kingship itself, much material exists on Yoruba religion with its pantheon of deities and cults which rivals that of ancient Greece.¹ But the constitutional relationship between the oba and his chiefs has not been discussed. This is probably because, in a century of such rapid change, the traditional relationship is thought to exist no longer. As a result of continuous tribal wars and the spread of Islam in the nineteenth century and the colonial administration of the twentieth century, the obas are no longer hidden within their palaces, appearing to their people only on a few ceremonial occasions; they have become popular figures and often highly autocratic rulers. The roles of the chiefs too have changed; many of them, whose functions were in the past ritual or of specialized executive importance, have tended to rank themselves with those chiefs whose role is primarily legislative, the incentive usually being a seat on the Native Authority or Local Government council.

It is thus often difficult to elucidate, from the day-to-day meetings of obas and their chiefs, the traditional principles of constitutional law which have governed their behaviour. But these laws do still become apparent today in the conflicts which occur over the installation of a new ruler or in the attempts to depose an unpopular one, the traditional role of the oba being contrasted here with the modern autocratic roles which he has tended to assume. By 'traditional role' I mean, in this context, the role which he is held by his chiefs and people to have performed traditionally,

¹ R. E. Dennett, *Nigerian Studies*, 1910; J. O. Lucas, *Religion of the Yorubas*, 1948; G. Parrinder has outlined the sacred attributes of Yoruba kingship in *West African Religion*, 1949, pp. 211 ff., *African*

Traditional Religion, 1954, ch. vi, and in 'Divine Kingship in West Africa', *Numen*, vol. iii, 1956, pp. 111-21.

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and which he ought therefore to perform today. I do not wish to suggest that there ever existed, in Yoruba history, an idyllic period when obas performed exactly the roles expected of them, though in periods of less violent change the deviations from the ideal role would tend to be less striking. I do consider, however, that the ideal traditional roles described today are probably little different from those operative a century ago. Contemporary documentary evidence on this point is scarce, but it does not contradict this assumption.

The constitutional aspects of the oba in one kingdom—that of Ado Ekiti—will be described here. Between the many Yoruba kingdoms there are striking differences in social and political structure; among the northern Yoruba the patrilineage is the dominant social group, among the southern Yoruba (Ijebu and Ondo) it is the cognatic descent group.¹ In some areas chiefs are selected by and from among lineage members; in others appointment to a grade rests, basically, with the existing members of the grade.² Yet throughout Yoruba country the rituals of kingship and the constitutional roles of the obas tend to form a common pattern. In analysing Ado Ekiti I have consciously stressed those points which I know to be applicable to the numerous other kingdoms in which I have worked. There are, of course, some kingdoms to which these generalizations do not apply in their entirety—e.g. Ibadan, technically not a kingdom at all, has no royal lineage, the Olubadan, the most senior chief, having been promoted from the lowest hierarchies of chieftaincy on the deaths of those ranked above him; Abeokuta, also founded in the 1830's, where the people of the numerous Egba townships (140 is the number often cited) struggle with the problems of federal government; and Iwo, where the rapid influx of refugees from the nineteenth-century wars (Iwo's population is now 100,000), the consequent territorial expansion of the kingdom, and the fifty-year reign of a single oba have somehow resulted in the assumption of considerable political power by the descendants of this one ruler.

THE ORIGIN OF SACRED KINGSHIP

Sacred kingship is, among the Yoruba, an ancient institution. We do not know how or when it was introduced to this part of Nigeria, though we suspect that it was more than a thousand years ago. We presume that the Yoruba peoples are descended from several waves of migrants moving from the savanna into the forest. Yet the Yoruba today see themselves as a homogeneous people; each town, as we shall see below, has its own royal and non-royal descent groups but there is among the Yoruba no ruling clan or aristocratic group, such as the Fulani of the emirates of Northern Nigeria.³ It is not difficult to accept that, with polygyny on the scale practised by Yoruba rulers and chiefs and with a considerable internal movement of population consequent upon struggles for titled office in the numerous kingdoms, any ethnical differences between the indigenous people and a more powerful incoming group—whether this power be the result of superior numbers or techniques—would be occluded within a relatively short period.

¹ For a more detailed description of the variations in Yoruba social structure see my article 'Some Notes on Yoruba Rules of Succession and on Family Property', *Journal of African Law*, vol. iii, 1959, pp. 7-32.

² These differences are elaborated in my article

'The Traditional Political System of the Yoruba', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. x, 1954, pp. 366-84.

³ The Fulani political system is described by M. G. Smith, 'The Hausa System of Social Status', *Africa*, xxix, 1959, pp. 239-52.

In the nineteenth century the Yoruba kingdoms were independent of one another and the people remember no period, besides that subsumed in the origin myths, when all Yoruba formed a single political unit. The term Yoruba was applied originally not, as it is widely used today, to the whole people, but only to the Oyo;¹ in some areas the word *anago* was used by the Yoruba to describe the common language, and this term has been adopted in Dahomey as a name for the people. But it seems that the Yoruba of the early nineteenth century and before knew themselves as Ifes, Ijeshas, Oyos, &c., after the designations of their kingdoms and had no word to describe themselves collectively.

Yet the origin myths, known to all Yoruba, do provide the concept of unity; into these tribal myths the people of each kingdom fit their own important ancestors. The myths fall basically into two groups—those telling of the creation of the world and those describing conquest. Typical of the former is one which tells how Olorun (lit. owner of the sky), the high god to whom sacrifices are not made, let from the sky a chain down which climbed Oduduwa carrying a cock, a handful of earth, and a palm nut: Oduduwa threw the earth on to the waters, the cock scratched it and it became land, and the nut, when planted, grew to a palm tree with sixteen branches, symbolizing the sixteen original crowned rulers. The conquest myth tells of Oduduwa coming from the east and settling at (a presumably uninhabited) Ile Ife—the centre of the world according to the creation myth—where he had seven grandchildren, the youngest of whom was Oranyan who founded the present ruling dynasties of Oyo and Benin.²

Oduduwa is conceived in these myths as the father of the original crowned rulers. Ile Ife is pictured as a city which became so burdened with royal princes that on a certain day Oduduwa dispatched them all into the forests and savanna to found their own kingdoms. Yet all Yoruba today think of themselves as the descendants of Oduduwa.³ The present Alafin is the fiftieth in succession to Oranyan, and the Oba of Benin the thirty-eighth in succession to Eweka, the son of Oranyan by a local woman. There seem, however, to be no myths telling of the character of Oduduwa or of the nature of his reign, to provide a model of the ideal roles of the oba.

A detailed analysis of these myths and their variants would perhaps contribute towards a clearer understanding of Yoruba pre-history. With our present knowledge only the vaguest hypotheses are possible. My own is that immigrants travelling from the Benue valley first brought sacred kingship to Ife, together with such arts as yam cultivation and perhaps iron working. Then, perhaps in the thirteenth century, Ile Ife and its dependent kingdoms were conquered by a small ruling group, with which is associated the cult hero Oranyan, which came from the area of the Middle Niger, perhaps near Bussa, and established the kingdoms of Oyo and Benin.⁴

In the succeeding centuries Oyo and Benin grew to become large empires which, at the heights of their power, were contiguous in northern Ekiti; but at other periods of weak central authority the small kingdoms on their peripheries were practically

¹ Ekiti, for instance, still on occasion use the term Yoruba to designate the Oyo people. In this paper I shall use the term to embrace all Yoruba-speaking peoples.

² A fuller account of the conquest myth is given by S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 1921, pp. 3 ff., 15.

³ The Yoruba cultural association is known as *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*—the society of the children of Oduduwa.

⁴ Similar outlines of the early history of Western Nigeria are given by S. O. Biobaku, *The Lugard Lectures*, 1955, Federal Information Service, Lagos.

independent. Between Oyo and Benin lay a zone of such small kingdoms, some of ancient foundation and others of more recent creation by rebel princes and chiefs from the great empires. There would seem to have been no marked immigration into Yoruba-Benin country since the thirteenth century.

THE ORIGINS OF ADO EKITI

The origin myth of Ado tells how the Ewi (the title of the oba of Ado) was a junior brother of the Oba of Benin (and thus a son of Oduduwa) who followed that oba to Benin when the princes of Oduduwa dispersed from Ile Ife; here the brothers quarrelled and the Ewi retraced his steps, halting at Idoani before reaching Ado, where a small indigenous group accepted him as their oba on account of his royal birth.¹ The myth tells in detail of the Ewi's route to Ado, details which are today commemorated at rituals performed at shrines along the route.² Subsequent to the arrival of the Ewi other groups of migrants settled in the town, founding their own lineages; each of these has its own myths of origin described below.

Myths current in Ado, but not forming part of the 'official history', suggest the previous existence in the Ado area of a number of small settlements. Those no longer exist, the villages having been destroyed (or abandoned) and their people absorbed into the lineages of Ado town. One occasionally meets a sole survivor who insists that a certain name represents not merely the name of a geographical feature but of a lineage and its village.

THE STRUCTURE OF ADO

Ado is a compact town of 25,000 people, almost the largest settlement in Ekiti Division. It is anomalous, however, in that it consists of three distinct but adjacent settlements—Oke Ewi (population approx. 16,000), Odo Ado (approx. 7,000), and Oke Ila (approx. 1,500). Each of these has its own chieftaincy system but the Ewi, whose palace lies in Oke Ewi, is oba of all three settlements; Odo Ado and Oke Ila, unlike the subordinate towns of the kingdom, have no ruler of their own; their chiefs, however, have no right to appoint or depose the Ewi.³ In the following paragraphs I therefore refer to Oke Ewi alone.

The palace, a walled area covering some 15 acres, lies in the centre of Oke Ewi. Around a large courtyard live the royal servants and migrant Hausa. In a series of small courtyards at one corner the Ewi used to meet his chiefs, and in the innermost one he lived. The present Ewi, an educated ruler, has built an imposing modern house behind the traditional structure. In front of the palace lies the town's principal market, and beyond this is a quarter in which lived the royal slaves. Close to the

¹ The Idoani myths state that their own founder-oba, the Alaini, was a Benin prince sent to rule a border town of the empire, and that the first Ewi was an Idoani prince who fought for the throne, and, losing, emigrated. Other myths told in Ado suggest that the first Ewi gained secular power in the town by intervening in the title disputes of the indigenous people, so overcoming first one faction and then another.

² In most Yoruba towns the first ruler of the dynasty is said to have 'founded' the town—a

small group of indigenes accepting his rule. In other cases, Ijebu Ode for instance, the ruler arrived in a sizeable town, and here the myths ascribe the acceptance of his rule primarily to his royal birth and descent from Oduduwa.

³ The most senior ranking *Ihare* chiefs—the Odofin of Odo Ado and the Alarierin of Oke Ila—are rather more important than their opposite number—the Odogun of Oke Ewi; meetings of the chiefs of their respective settlements are regularly held in their houses.

palace are the compounds of descendants of the past Ewis; beyond these, in a circle around the palace, are the large compounds of the other lineages of the town.

Social structure. The royal lineage (*idile oba*) comprises all those persons who trace their descent in the male line from the first Ewi, who is held to be the founder of Ado. Structurally the royal lineage differs from others in the town; its peculiarities are described in more detail in a later section.

In Ado, as in every Yoruba town, the king-lists give the name of every oba believed to have ascended the throne; at ceremonies the drummers describe the characteristics of the reigns of each oba. The present Ewi is the twenty-first in succession to the founder of the town. There seems to be no evidence that Yoruba obas were ever killed, or 'asked to die', at the end of a reign of seven or fourteen years. It is difficult to calculate the average length of a reign, but we might ascribe the foundation of Ado to the seventeenth century. Most persons claiming membership of the royal lineage and thus describing themselves as *omo oba* (children of the oba), and using the appellations of the royal lineage—*oba* (m.), *oja* (f.)—seem to trace descent from recent rulers. In Oke Ewi and Odo Ado are compounds whose male members claim descent from an early Ewi, but these people do not describe themselves as *omo oba* and these segments, as we may term them, function to a large degree as if they were independent lineages.

There is no term used in Ado (or in most other Yoruba towns) which collectively describes the non-royal lineages; each is merely an *ebi* or *idile*.¹ In Oke Ewi are twenty-four lineages, each with its own compound. Each has its myths of origin: in some cases it is said that the lineage founder 'came with the Ewi', for such an origin confers prestige on lineage members as it establishes the antiquity of the group; in other cases the lineage founder is said to have fought for an oba's title in a far kingdom and, losing the contest to a junior brother, to have emigrated to Ado. The myths describe how the lineage came to worship its own particular deity and relate the origin of the lineage's members' distinctive appellations. They describe too how the reigning Ewi gave the immigrant land in the town for his compound and beyond it for his farms, and bestowed on him an hereditary chieftaincy title to recompense him for the one he failed to win in his home town. Thus the lineage is a corporate group, its male members living together and having common rights to land and chieftaincy titles. Elderly men conceive their town as composed of lineages little dependent one on the other, but each dependent individually on the oba. Though tracing their origin from the home town of their founder, they make no attempt to trace genealogically their ultimate descent from Oduduwa.

Most Ado lineages seem to have been founded by men coming from kingdoms east of Ado and particularly those in the Akoko District of Owo Division. Oke Ewi provides no example of a lineage founded by a son of a ruler, such as the Oni of Ife or Alafin of Oyo, through whom ascent can, of course, be traced to Oduduwa. Such an origin does confer prestige on lineage members, though it is but one of many factors, such as lineage size or titles held. Where it does occur, a royal origin of this nature gives the lineage no special political rights.

In the non-royal lineages no attempt is made to remember the names of all those

¹ I have described the structure of the patrilineage at greater length in 'The Yoruba Lineage', *Africa*, 3, xxv, 1955, pp. 235-51.

men who have held the lineage's hereditary chieftaincy title; only holders in the past century can be named, together with one or two earlier heroes. The genealogy as presented is foreshortened, so that the founder is placed four or five generations above the living elders. The two, three, four, or five sons of the founder are themselves founders of the constituent segments of the lineage. These segments function as corporate groups; sometimes they hold usufructory rights to homogeneous blocks of farm land; the hereditary chieftaincy title should be held by a member of each segment in turn. There is evidence that small segments tend over the years to unite while larger ones split into two, for one of the main purposes of segmentation seems to be to enable every member of the lineage to be eligible for the chieftaincy title at some period of his life; as the segments are more nearly equal in size, so is every member of the lineage given an equal chance of achieving the title.

Political structure. The Ewi is king of Ado, a sacred king. He is the direct descendant of the first ruler of the dynasty, said to be the founder of Ado. It is this descent from the founder of the town which validates the rule of the Yoruba oba; it is not sufficient to trace descent from Oduduwa, for every Yoruba claims such an origin. But while it is not relevant that members of non-royal lineages should so trace their ancestry, it is obligatory that an oba should be able to show how he is descended directly from Oduduwa; only when such descent is shown may the oba validly assume the beaded crown and other symbols of royalty.¹

There are three grades of chiefs (*oloye*) in Oke Ewi. Most senior are the *Ihare* chiefs; the *Olori Marun* (lit. five heads) rank highest in this group—these five titles are hereditary within the five largest lineages (large, perhaps, because they hold such a title). Below these are the junior *Ihare*, grouped as the *Elesi* (five chiefs) and the *Ijegbe* (ten chiefs). Some of these titles are hereditary within the smaller lineages while others are filled by appointment by the oba and senior *Ihare* chiefs. The second grade is of *Ijoye*, a group of at least twenty-two chiefs (though most titles are today vacant); only the most senior title in the group is hereditary within a lineage. The third grade is the *Elegbe*; again most titles are now vacant, though in the past it would seem that each lineage had two or more *Elegbe*. The most senior title is hereditary and some other titles are reserved for members of the royal lineage. In Oke Ewi, as in other Ekiti towns, the chieftaincy titles seem to be as equitably distributed among the non-royal lineages as their number will allow.

Titles which are hereditary within a lineage are the corporate property of all lineage members. On the death of a chief the lineage meets to elect a successor. The title should pass in rotation to each segment, though this is rarely followed strictly; a title can never pass directly from a man to his own son. The lineage is guided in its choice by the pronouncements of the *ifa* oracle. The oba and other chiefs may not interfere in such an election, save only to ensure that it is fairly conducted. The oba should accept the selection of the lineage and perform the ceremonies installing the new chief. Lineage meetings are presided over by the oldest man (*olori ebi*) and in these meetings the chief is ranked according to his age. His office as chief gives him such prestige in the lineage that he is often regarded as the head of the lineage.

¹ In some recent instances, where an oba has granted the ruler of a subordinate town the right to wear a beaded crown, local historians have disagreed on the 'official' myth—some holding that the

founder of the subordinate town came direct from Ile Ife while others argue that he was a son of a past oba of the metropolitan town.

In selecting men to hold those chieftaincy titles which are not hereditary, the *Ihare* chiefs have a determining if not final voice. Since no *Ihare* or *ijoye* titles may be held by members of the royal lineage, it will be appreciated that the chiefs are the elected representatives of the non-royal lineages in the Yoruba town.

The functions of these grades of chiefs are described in later sections.

THE APPOINTMENT AND INSTALLATION OF THE OBA

The right to the throne is held by the members of the royal lineage—that is by those persons who can trace patrilineal descent from the first Ewi. The mode of succession of the early Ewis is not clear. Today the royal lineage is divided into two segments, named after rulers of the mid-nineteenth century, and the oba is selected alternately from these segments. Not all male members of a segment are eligible as candidates for the throne. Firstly, only a son born to an oba while on the throne—excepting the first such son—is eligible. (In Ado the eldest son born on the throne is allowed considerable licence in his behaviour.) Secondly, the son must have been born to a free woman and not to a slave. Thirdly, he must be free from physical blemish; in a recent instance one man was rejected as being too tall—he would have looked down on his people!

After the death and burial of an oba the elder members of the royal lineage present the *Ihare* chiefs with a list of those candidates whom they consider eligible and suitable—they do not necessarily put forward *every* eligible candidate. The chiefs consider the merits of each candidate and were, in the past, guided to a considerable degree by the pronouncements of the *ifa* oracle upon the length and prosperity of the reign of each candidate should he be chosen. Public discussion was limited (though today it is not so), for the mass of the people felt that the duty of selecting the oba lay with the chiefs alone; nevertheless, the chiefs would of course be guided by any strong popular feelings about a candidate. The senior *Ihare* chiefs, the *Olori Marun*, make the final choice of the new oba and put in train the installation ceremonies. These are long and complex but they tend to follow a similar pattern throughout the Yoruba kingdoms.

It is presumed that the Ewi elect will be most reluctant to assume office; he is therefore 'captured' by the *efa* (town police) while hiding in his house. These men take him into the bush and tell him how he should rule the town. The new oba then traces much of the route traditionally taken by the first Ewi, performing ceremonies at shrines along the route and eventually reaching Ado where, in the compound of the lineage of the indigenous inhabitants, he renews his ancestor's promise to govern well. Here too he is clad in rags and beaten; he then assumes a white cloth and announces his new name in a rite which symbolizes his rebirth as oba.

Most Yoruba are today reluctant to admit that the custom of eating the excised heart of the late oba was practised in their own town; it was, however, probably universal throughout Yoruba country. It constituted the most important of the rituals by which the new oba became a consecrated ruler. All the sacred powers of preceding obas (and ultimately those of Oduduwa) thus pass to the new ruler. It is believed by the Yoruba that a man who performed these rites, if not eligible by descent for the throne, would die. Conversely, an eligible ruler who omitted the rites would not be able to withstand the magic potency of the charms incorporated within the royal

regalia and he too would die. Consecration gives to the oba the wisdom to rule well; his rule is good because he is consecrated.¹

For three months after these ceremonies the oba lives in the compound of one of the chiefs—in Ado that of the Arowa, an *Ijegbe* chief, whose compound is opposite the palace entrance. Here he is visited daily by his chiefs, who instruct him in the arts of government and in the history of the town. Then he enters his palace, a point at which he used in the past to lose all informal personal contact with his chiefs and people, save only those whose titles conferred the right to enter his personal apartments.

The ceremonies of installation and burial of the oba provide duties for each chief and non-royal lineage of Oke Ewi and for the members of each subordinate town in the kingdom. These duties are jealously preserved by their holders; they symbolize the participation of each lineage in the government of the town.

The sacred character of the oba is expressed in numerous customs. He does not 'die' but 'goes away'. He may not be seen eating and his food was, at least until the nineteen twenties in Ado, prepared by royal wives working naked. His bare foot should not touch the ground. He may take any woman as wife and a royal wife (*olori*) may not be seduced by any other man: the penalty was death for both parties. All royal wives passed to the successor to the throne and not to the kin of a deceased oba. But the health of an oba is not held to affect the prosperity of the town—the failing ruler was not put to death. Nor does he perform ritual sexual intercourse to promote crop fertility.

The oba formerly appeared to his people on very few occasions and on these he was barely visible as a person. Surrounded by trumpeters, umbrella carriers and the like, he sat clad in voluminous gowns (in Ado sometimes made of coral) and veiled by a conical beaded crown. But he is not a priest, though he is the ritual head of the town. As elsewhere, the town ceremonies of Ado seem to fulfil two purposes—the blessing of the oba, as representative of the town, by its deities and the oba's conveyance of these blessings to his people in return for their homage. In Ado the cycle of ceremonies begins with *Etado*, when the priests of the spirits living in the hill overlooking the town dance before the Ewi; this is followed by three ceremonies at which the three grades of chiefs—the *Elegbe* first and finally the *Iharc*—dance before him and prostrate to him to receive his blessing.

THE WEALTH OF THE OBA

As the oba is the personification of his town, his wealth—reflected in the magnificence of his palace and his regalia—establishes the prosperity and rank of the town among its neighbours. The Yoruba despise as backward those neighbouring peoples without institutions of kingship.

Under traditional law the oba brought little to the throne with him; his house and farms were taken over by his immediate kin. But everything which came to him while on the throne belonged to the throne. The maintenance of the palace demanded a considerable income. The palace was built by the people and compulsory labour was

¹ It was widely believed that the late Awujale of Ijebu was not duly consecrated at his installation because the last consecrated oba was still alive in exile; in addition his eligibility for the throne was

dubious. His reign was marked by a succession of political crises disturbing the peace of the town and his people were apt to murmur 'But what can we expect when we do not have a proper oba?'

due on the royal farms; on these farms the palace slaves also worked. Annual tithes, usually in the form of crops, were paid through the chiefs at festivals; special levies might be ordered in addition. Tolls were levied on all produce entering the town. One-third of all war booty was handed over to the oba, and a further third to the chief under whose jurisdiction the captor lived. Death duties were exacted on the estates of wealthy men. Part of the fines levied by the oba and chiefs, sitting as the highest judicial court, passed to him, as did part of the fees paid by a new chief before his installation. The greater part of the income of the oba was collected by the chiefs, who kept a share as their own perquisite; in general, however, the share of the oba tended to equal that of all the chiefs together. The wealth accumulated by an oba passed, at his death, entirely to his successor in office. But the wealth of a powerful chief passed to his sons and near kin, following the normal rules of succession to property; since each chief would have many sons, his estate was divided into small lots and the power which such wealth represented was broken; it was thus almost impossible for the oba to be rivalled in wealth by one of his senior chiefs.

THE SACRED RULER, DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED

The ceremonies of installation and burial of the sacred Yoruba oba, together with the sanctity of his person, are attributes similar to those described for the so-termed divine kings of other parts of Africa. But as the previous section demonstrates, an oba is chosen by the chiefs who are the representatives of the non-royal lineages of the town. We thus have the apparent dichotomy of a sacred ruler who is democratically elected. The Yoruba themselves see nothing untoward in this, for while they hold their rulers in great reverence they are quite ready to add that he 'belongs to the people' and can be removed if he becomes unpopular.

It has been suggested that sacred kingship of this type is associated with a lineage structure in which the lineages, or the small territorial units which their villages form, are virtually politically independent; the king unites these groups in rituals but does not constitute a centralized form of government.¹ The lineage structure of Ado would seem to support the first part of this hypothesis; but in other Yoruba kingdoms the chiefs are not elected by the descent groups (though the members of a group may co-operate in seeking that a non-hereditary title be bestowed on one of their members, and having won such an honour seek to retain it thereafter). It is also difficult to conceive the oba merely as the overall ritual head of a number of independent lineages, for the government of the Yoruba town is highly complex and centralized, and the oba is at its apex.

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE TOWN

The oba is the personification of his town. 'Without the oba the town would cease to exist', say the Yoruba; the implication is that without the kingship peace could not be maintained between the descent groups composing the town. 'When we . . . try . . . to dispense with the position of king we immediately find the town with the people concerned thrown into confusion; we find lawlessness and general disorder.'²

¹ Cf. E. E. Evans-Pritchard in *The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan*, 1948.

² The Odemo of Ishara, oba of a town of Ijebu

Remo, speaking in the Western Region House of Chiefs on the occasion of the death of King George VI.

The Yoruba say that the new ruler *je oba* (becomes, or eats, the oba). The term *ijoba* connotes government—the Yoruba used to refer to *ijoba gesi*—the British or Colonial government—but it also connotes a reign. The phrase ‘the king governs’ can only be rendered *oba j’oba* or *oba fe ijoba* (the oba does the work of the oba). Distinctions between ‘govern’ and ‘reign’ are not possible in Yoruba except, of course, through long explanation. The oba is said to ‘take care of the town’ (*fe toju ilu*), ‘to exercise restraint upon the town’ (*sakoso ilu*). Under a good oba the town is said to be ‘improved’ (*tunfe*—connoting to renew, improve); under a bad oba the town is ‘spoilt’ (*baje*—to spoil, corrupt, defile, or destroy).

The government, of which the oba is the head, is sovereign; it is concerned with the public affairs of the townspeople. Nothing is theoretically outside its competence, though it is little concerned with those actions of individuals or small groups which do not affect other groups. There is in Ado, as elsewhere, the distinction between the rights of the government or oba and those of the individual which it is the duty of the government to protect. But an analogy of federal government—with some political powers held by the obas and chiefs and others by the lineages—is misleading and wrong.

The government of the Yoruba kingdom was, in the last century, much concerned with relationships with neighbouring kingdoms, in the conduct of wars, and in controlling the admission of refugees into the kingdom. Lineages possessed what might loosely be termed rights of ownership over lineage land, but the oba and chiefs had unlimited power to control the use of the land, as for instance by regulating bush firing or the export of certain crops. On behalf of the people the oba and chiefs safeguarded the common rights of the people to hunt on any land within the kingdom, and to collect firewood or stone. Through the collection of tolls and in the organization of long-distance caravans they could control much of the trading activity of the town.

The political views of the mass of the people were expressed in their lineage meetings; these views were carried by the chiefs, sitting in these meetings as ordinary members, to their own assemblies. In common with most elected representatives, the Ado chief not only has a duty to his lineage but also to the town; at his installation he promises to obey the Ewi. Each grade of chiefs meets separately and its conclusions are reported to the next higher grade. The *Olori Marun*—the most senior *Ihare* chiefs—used to sit daily on the veranda of one of the palace courtyards, discussing the town’s affairs. Their decisions were then communicated to the oba by one of these chiefs or by a palace slave. The oba then announced this decision as his own. The decision of his chiefs thus became the decision of the oba. The royal ‘ban’ gave such decisions the highest authority and attached to them, in the event of their violation, the most extreme sanction.

The meetings of the chiefs were not only legislative but also judicial. The two functions were not in fact sharply separated but were dealt with in one and the same meeting. Disputes within a lineage were, in the first instance, dealt with by lineage elders; these were taken on appeal to the chiefs, who also heard cases involving members of different lineages. Cases of homicide, treason, and offences against deities were heard in the first instance by the oba and chiefs. They might fine the guilty party, imprison him, expel him from the town, or sentence him to death. (In

the last instance the oba had the prerogative of mercy.) The oba rarely, in the past, sat with his chiefs in council. If he did so he spoke little during the debate but his final conclusion reflected an opinion which the chiefs could accept unanimously.

Political power is segmentary and in Ado the segments are the lineages each struggling against its neighbour for its own aggrandisement—rights to more land or to new titles. Administration is however hierarchical.¹ In Ado three channels of administration are recognized. The decisions of the oba and chiefs were announced through the town, by one of the oba's palace slaves. Other slaves acted as general messengers and would be sent, with the oba's staff, to other towns of the kingdom; they would also summon persons to the palace. The *efa* association whose members were recruited from all the lineages of the town acted as a police force, seizing rougher criminals and breaking up minor riots. The age-grade system has now disappeared in Ado, being without a modern function, but it seems that the work of the *Elegbe* chiefs was, in the past, concerned with the organization of these grades in war and public works. (The senior *Elegbe*, the Barafon, was the war-leader in Ado.) The functions of the *Ihare* and *Ijoye* chiefs were primarily deliberative but they usually had some executive functions in respect of their own lineages and quarters.

The kingdom. We have referred so far only to the government of the town of Ado (or more strictly of Oke Ewi). The Ewi is, however, the ruler of a larger kingdom, the seventeen subordinate towns of which have a total population of 35,000. The largest of these towns, Igede, has today a population of 6,100 inhabitants.

Each of the subordinate towns is organized in a manner similar to the metropolitan town. Some of these towns claim an origin earlier than the foundation of Ado, having acknowledged the Ewi as ruler on his arrival; in others the first rulers are said to have been exiled Ado princes. These towns, in common with the Ado lineages, usually have specific duties at the installation and burial of the Ewi. Their rulers usually take their title from their town—Onijan of Ijan, Oluyin of Iyin, the prefix *oni* or *olu* denoting possession. They hold the same constitutional position *vis-à-vis* their chiefs as the Ewi has towards his chiefs in Oke Ewi. The appointment of the subordinate ruler must be ratified by the Ewi, though he is installed in his own town by his own chiefs with the Ewi's messengers as witnesses. The subordinate towns have a large measure of internal independence but they could have in the past no separate foreign policy. Disputes between towns and all cases of homicide were referred to the Ewi and his chiefs. Tribute was paid annually to the Ewi. Each of the five senior chiefs of Oke Ewi was responsible for the subordinate towns along the road which passed out of the capital through his own quarter. All matters affecting the subordinate town were brought to the responsible chief, who presented them before the chiefs in council. The same chiefs collected the tribute from the subordinate towns. The subordinate towns had no part in the selection of the chief responsible for them or of the Ewi.

This pattern of government for the kingdom seems to have been fairly general among Yoruba kingdoms. Here, perhaps, it may be appropriate to use the analogy of a federal constitution with specific powers, those of internal government, being reserved for the subordinate towns; these towns would claim that the powers are

¹ For the concept of segmentary power-hierarchical administration I am indebted to M. G. Smith, 'Segmentary Lineage Systems', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. lxxxvi, part ii, 1956, pp. 39-80.

not delegated by the oba but are inherent in the foundation of their own settlements, and represent the powers which remain to them after ceding their sovereignty to the oba, whom they acknowledged by virtue of his royal birth or by conquest.

THE BALANCE OF POWER

The chiefs sitting in council make decisions; the oba, wealthy and sacred, ordains them. This is the ideal pattern—a delicate balance of power. Sometimes a senile and effete oba leaves his chiefs to govern the town, taking little interest himself in its affairs. At other times the new oba is a man of strong personality anxious to govern, and thus almost bound to clash with his chiefs who find themselves overruled or ignored. The balance is maintained by a variety of sanctions.

If oba and chiefs disagreed there was little by which the former could coerce the latter. The army of the kingdom was controlled by the chiefs. In Ado Ekiti it was the senior age grade, organized by the *Elegbé*, which provided the warriors. The oba could not call upon the army to quell a mass insurrection against his rule; but through the chiefs he could mobilize it to put down a minor rebellion within the metropolitan town or to bring to heel a recalcitrant subordinate town. During the period of tribal wars the palace slaves were often increased in number so that they formed a bodyguard around the oba, protecting him against any sudden attack by his people. Intrigue was the oba's prime weapon. The chieftaincy titles were, according to the myths, granted by the oba and could accordingly be withdrawn by him. He might convert a title to one hereditary within a lineage. He might make changes within the ranking of chiefs. In most Yoruba towns myths tell of such alterations in the pattern of chieftaincy.

Although the possession of a senior chieftaincy title, a famous origin, a long history in the town, and even of mere numbers, can confer prestige on a lineage, there is no formal ranking of the non-royal lineages: all are, in theory, equal. Yet each lineage competes for its own aggrandisement and royal recognition. Concerted action against an unpopular ruler was often foiled by tale-bearing chiefs who believed that the oba's rewards might benefit them more than a successful rebellion. The oba's messengers were largely instrumental in gathering rumours of threatened sedition and in spreading gossip to divide the chiefs against one another. The oba might also curse an opponent, a most terrible sanction. The Ewi still on occasion addresses formal meetings through his spokesman, an *Elegbé* chief of the royal lineage: on one occasion, at the installation of a chief, his reprimands to the lineage concerned for creating an acrimonious dispute were couched in the mildest terms—the spokesman embellished these considerably.

The oba might forbid one of the chiefs to enter the palace, thus preventing him from participating in the government of the town, and bringing disgrace upon his lineage. The oba could not depose a chief unless he could be proved guilty of crimes against the town as a whole; thus he could not easily rid himself of a chief who merely displeased him. Similarly, a chief could not be deposed by his own lineage, though if he died mysteriously it would often be believed that the lineage members had poisoned him.

The chiefs have had far greater power to coerce their oba, though it was often difficult to get unanimous action. Initially they might boycott the palace and govern

without the oba, relying on their popularity in the town to ensure obedience to their orders. However, such a boycott would involve the chiefs in a refusal to participate in rituals carried out by the oba on behalf of the town, and would thus endanger its prosperity. Ultimately the chiefs might ask their oba to die; (such precautions were taken in preparing the royal food that it was difficult to poison the oba). Deposition could only be effected by death and never by exile or abdication, for only by the death of one oba could his successor perform the consecration rituals necessary to validate his own rule. The demands of the chiefs were usually conveyed symbolically; in Oyo the Alafin was sent a gift of parrot eggs. The oba was then expected to take poison and thus commit suicide. Should the chiefs be slow to take action or should their demands go unheeded the people might themselves demand that their oba should go—either symbolically, as in Ado in 1940, when the Ewi's subjects clapped stones together in the market-place, or, practically, by stoning or firing the palace.

The deposition of a Yoruba oba is a constitutional procedure. The rights of the royal lineage are not questioned. The opposition of the chiefs is solely to the individual whom they selected and who has not fulfilled their hopes. When deposition has been decided upon, the chiefs probably have an alternative candidate for the throne in whom they feel confidence, and the opposition to an unpopular ruler may be formulated partly by listing the virtues existing in his rival; particularly is this so where the former failed to perform the due consecration ceremonies, and thus has no legitimate claim to rule. The procedure was simple. Yet it seems to have been rarely used. There is, for example, no record of such an occurrence in the Ado king-list. The oba's protection was his sacred right to rule. He did not stand above the customary law of his people; the law, ancient and supreme, stood unquestioned. His commands were valid, in the sight of his people, so long as they were within the law. He did not make new laws; he ordained the law to suit particular current needs, making the necessary rules. By his consecration the oba received wisdom to interpret the law—wisdom not possessed by his chiefs who had performed no such ceremonies. Thus, mere disagreement with his chiefs was not sufficient cause for the people to turn against their oba.¹

THE ROYAL LINEAGE

In a society where the ruler is so powerful, is the wealthiest person, and has far more wives than anybody else, it would perhaps seem inevitable that the royal lineage should be large and powerful and able to support its oba against the chiefs and the non-royal lineages. But in Yoruba towns several mechanisms exist for curbing the size and the political power of the royal lineage.

In Ado the royal lineage would seem to be small, considering that the present dynasty has probably ruled for three centuries; it numbers less perhaps than 2,000 persons. Those descended from recent Ewis live in Ogbon Ado, immediately west

¹ In Shaki, a town in the north of Oyo Province, ten out of the eighteen rulers of the nineteenth century were deposed. The oba of this town, the Okere, traces his descent from an influential warrior from Bussa, who settled in Shaki. So good, say the myths, was he at settling disputes that the Onishaki (at that time oba) suggested that he, the Okere, should deal

with such secular matters, leaving the Onishaki to look after the ritual. Thus the Okere became oba and the Onishaki is now a priest. A similar myth is related in Ikere, ten miles south of Ado, where the Ogoga (descended from an elephant hunter from Benin) similarly displaced the Onikere. The Ogogas have suffered from much unpopularity.

of the palace, while the compounds of six or more segments tracing descent from earlier rulers are scattered through the town.

In Ado a royal wife may not bear a child in the palace; she returns home to the compound of her own patrilineage, remaining there until the child is weaned when she again sleeps with the *oba*. Her status is recognized in the town by her peculiar hair style and by the palace messenger, who, in the past, invariably accompanied her. Her children often remain in her compound, growing up with the children of their mother's brother. In Ado little land, either in the town or outside on the farms, is held corporately by the royal lineage as distinct from the land attached to the *oba*'s title—the palace and the royal farms. A member of the royal lineage must usually obtain land from his mother's lineage.¹ A prince who is able and wealthy will build his compound at one edge of this lineage land and his children will later extend it. A modern example is provided by Ogirigbo, son of the eighteenth Ewi, who unsuccessfully contested the throne; he is now 100 years old and his compound, in the quarter of his mother's lineage, is surrounded by the houses of numerous and prosperous sons and grandsons. Less prosperous men become absorbed into their mothers' lineages, losing after three or four generations their status as *omo oba*, the genealogies usually featuring them as the direct issue of their mothers' fathers. There is no formal adoption ceremony; thus, once absorption has occurred it cannot be proved ever to have taken place. That it does occur can only be demonstrated by the absence of members of the royal lineage tracing descent from many of the earlier *obas*.

Yoruba often say that the post of *oba* was, in the past, so little to be envied that no disputes over accession to the throne ever occurred. Yet many of the immigrant lineages in Oke Ewi claim that their foundation arose from a title dispute in another town, the losing candidate emigrating because he was unwilling to acknowledge the rule of the successful man. Such recalcitrant emigrants would almost certainly travel beyond the confines of their own kingdoms and there is thus no reason why the home town should remember them in their myths.

A more loyal but still powerful prince could be sent to rule an outlying part of the kingdom; within the Ado kingdom the rulers of three subordinate towns—Aisegba, Igbimo, and Iluomoba—trace their descent from Ado princes. Once appointed to such a post, the prince becomes the founder of the ruling lineage of this subordinate town; although he may not describe himself as an *oba* or assume the regalia of royalty, his constitutional role towards his chiefs is similar to that of the *oba* towards the chiefs of the metropolitan town. The subordinate ruler may not live in the metropolitan town; he is buried in his own town; he cannot be promoted to any other office. Such an appointment of a prince has not been made in Ado within living memory; its occurrence in the past is evinced by the myths of the subordinate towns.

There are, however, on the outer limits of Ado farm land, where the town bounds the lands of larger subordinate towns, a number of very small farm villages, each of which is headed by a royal prince taking his title from his village. Today nearly thirty such villages are listed. Many of the title-holders at present live in Ado town, but it is believed that in the past they were confined to their villages and did not participate

¹ By the same process a large non-royal lineage may absorb members of smaller ones. Royal wives who are not members of Ado lineages are often lodged with chiefs.

in the government of Ado. It would seem that the villages were founded by important princes with a small personal following, and that these princes and their issue became hereditary rulers; if the village attracted other settlers a chieftaincy system developed and the village gradually achieved the status of a subordinate town within the kingdom. Odo, headed by the Akitipa, situated nine miles from Ado and only two from its erstwhile subordinate, Ilawe, is the largest village today (population c. 300); it has its own chiefs, but the Akitipa now lives in Ado (where he has achieved posts such as native court and local government council membership to which his title does not traditionally entitle him). Odo still ranks as a village.

Thus, the size of the royal lineage is reduced by the slow absorption of the weaker members into the non-royal lineages and by the expulsion of the more powerful ones.

The non-royal lineages of Ado extend the limits of their farm land to the boundaries of those of the subordinate towns or to the frontiers of the kingdom. The oba has little land on which to settle his own children. His entire income should be used for the benefit of the town and not for the advancement of his own family. At his death all his wealth should pass to his successor—his children should receive nothing. In the past the close kin of the Ewi were not allowed to enter his private apartments in the palace. The oba is ministered to by his wives, palace servants, and those chiefs with rights of access to him—in Oke Ewi one chief from each grade. (Today the degree to which an oba may use his income from his salary and gifts to build private houses, and educate his children in the manner of other wealthy men of the town has become a problem.)

Members of the royal lineage are not eligible for any of the *Ihare* titles. They are thus debarred from full participation in the government of the town. They cannot, of course, be omitted from its administration and certain *Elegbe* titles are reserved for them.¹ Poor and without political rights, the status of the royal lineage is debased. Often it is difficult to discover the eligible heirs to the throne, so humble are they. Some princes are, of course, prominent men, but they might have become even more influential had they belonged to a non-royal lineage and thus been eligible for a chieftaincy title. Absorption into the maternally related lineages is thus encouraged. Yet a vacant throne is often bitterly contested, not only by the candidates themselves but by their own close kin and members of their own segment of the royal lineage. One might well ask why members of the royal lineage who are not eligible for the throne struggle so tenaciously to support a candidate who could (in the past) bring them so little material reward. Why do they not allow their membership of the royal lineage to fall into oblivion?

It takes at least three generations, and probably longer, for a man and his descendants to become completely absorbed into his mother's lineage. And although a lineage, lacking a suitable member, may sometimes elect to its hereditary chieftaincy a son of one of its own female members, it would never choose an acknowledged member of the royal lineage. Thus, members of the royal lineage see participation in a contest for the throne as a rare but legitimate method of exercising *some* political influence even at the expense of delaying still further absorption into a non-royal lineage. Furthermore members of each segment which may put up eligible candidates

¹ In some Yoruba towns titles, usually termed chieftaincy titles, are conferred by the oba on leading members of the royal lineage; such titles confer on their holders no rights to sit with the chiefs governing the town.

have some pride in their own group and are anxious to ensure that the rotation of the kingship between the segments is followed. In Ado, with only two such segments, the rotation has been observed during the past century. But in other towns, with three or more segments, there is always a danger that the rotation may be upset in order to install a popular candidate. If a segment misses a turn there is a possibility that its own eligible candidates—those born to a reigning oba—will be dead before the next succession, in which event the segment will have lost its rights as a ruling house and will lose its prestige in the town.

The chiefs too are not necessarily unanimous—at least initially so—in their selection of a new oba. We should be mistaken in regarding a contest for the vacant throne as a struggle for political power between the segments of the royal lineage, in which rival candidates seek the support of the chiefs to improve their chances. The members of the royal lineage have no political power and strive merely to enhance their own prestige. In all the instances I have encountered, in which deposition of an unpopular oba has been mooted, the opposition to the oba has invariably been led by the senior chiefs or by an educated man (representing the literate group); members of the ruling lines who, as eligible candidates for the throne, were alternative rulers, played no active part in the campaigns against the oba. In most cases it has seemed likely that those leading the opposition to the oba have not had in mind any particular successor to the throne.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have described only the constitutional aspects of Yoruba kingship, but I do not wish to infer that I consider the ritual roles of the sacred ruler to be unimportant, though today the decline in traditional religious beliefs and the development of modern local government institutions is leading many Yoruba to conceive the roles of their oba not as those of the sacred king, but as the secular roles of the constitutional monarch. As the oba becomes less sacred, so is he less free from criticism should he overstep his constitutional rights.

To recapitulate: we have seen that in the Yoruba town the kingship is hereditary in the lineage of the ruler who founded the town (or who was accepted as ruler by the indigenous inhabitants on account of his royal descent). In many towns only those princes born to a reigning oba are eligible for the throne. There is thus a clear distinction between the royal lineage and the non-royal descent groups of the town. But while the candidates for the throne are proposed by the elders of the royal lineage it is the chiefs, representing the non-royal lineages, who make the final selection. Although the oba is at the head of the government of his town and kingdom he may act only on the advice of his chiefs. The balance of power between oba and chiefs depends ultimately on personalities. The position of the royal lineage is the key to the system. No member of the royal lineage may hold any chieftaincy title giving political power, though they may hold titles conferring administrative duties. Princes have no economic power from the control of land; they may not share in the wealth of the throne. The size of the royal lineage has been reduced by the expulsion of the more prominent princes and the absorption of others into their maternal lineages. Membership of the royal lineage confers less prestige than of the non-royal lineages.

This political system is markedly different from, for example, that of the emirates

of Northern Nigeria, where the Fulani are a ruling aristocracy clearly established by conquest. There the contests for power lie between the segments of the royal lineage; the commoners have no direct representation in the government of the emirate (though individual commoners may be selected by the emir for high posts). The senior princes rule over subordinate towns and villages, but these offices are but stepping-stones to the highest posts in the metropolitan town. Emphasis on the sacred aspects of kingship and on the complexity and centralization of government has tended to obscure the constitutional variations which occur among tribal kingdoms. The points raised here may provide useful criteria for a more detailed classification of such kingdoms.

Résumé

LA ROYAUTE SACREE ET LE GOUVERNEMENT CHEZ LES YORUBA

L'INTÉRÊT porté à la royauté sacrée chez des peuples tels que les Yoruba de la Nigeria Occidentale s'est habituellement concentré sur ses aspects rituels aux dépens de l'analyse de ses particularités constitutionnelles; ceci provient sans doute de la difficulté qu'on a à évaluer la structure politique traditionnelle au cours d'une période d'évolution sociale accélérée. Néanmoins, on fait ordinairement appel aux agents constitutionnels traditionnels aux époques de crise politique — installation d'un nouveau roi ou tentative de déposition d'un roi impopulaire. Dans le présent mémoire, est analysé le rôle constitutionnel de l'*oba* dans un seul royaume Yoruba.

La royauté Yoruba est une institution ancienne. Mais, bien que les mythes présupposent une époque où le pays tout entier dépendait de l'autorité d'un seul souverain, dès les temps historiques, le territoire fut divisé en de nombreux royaumes. Cependant le peuple Yoruba est homogène et prétend descendre d'Oduduwa, aïeul et premier souverain.

Dans chaque ville, les descendants patrilinéaires du fondateur, homme relié à Oduduwa, constituent la royauté ou le lignage royal, dans lequel sont choisis les *oba* successifs. Ceux qui arrivèrent plus tard dans la ville fondèrent leurs propres lignages, qui possèdent chacun des terres en propriété collective et un ou plusieurs titres de chef. A Ado, ces titres sont hiérarchisés. Les candidatures au trône sont présentées par les anciens du lignage royal, mais le choix ultime du nouveau roi reste aux mains des plus âgés des chefs des lignages ordinaires. Lors de son intronisation, le nouveau détenteur du pouvoir est consacré et reçoit ainsi les attributs rituels de ses prédécesseurs.

L'*oba* est non seulement la personnification de la ville, mais aussi le chef de son gouvernement. Les décisions des chefs sont ratifiées et annoncées par l'*oba*. L'équilibre entre les pouvoirs est minutieusement réglé: les chefs ont le pouvoir de déposer un *oba* impopulaire, tandis que l'*oba* peut faire pression sur ses chefs en accroissant ou diminuant leurs titres. Dans cet organisation, l'*oba* reçoit très peu d'appui du lignage royal. Car l'importance de ce lignage reste limitée, ses membres étant absorbés dans des lignages ordinaires ou exilés dans d'autres villes. En outre, les titres qu'ils peuvent détenir ne peuvent leur conférer de pouvoirs politiques, mais doivent rester des titres secondaires correspondant aux seules fonctions administratives. La différence reste donc appréciable entre une royauté de ce genre et celle où le roi est le représentant principal d'un clan régnant dont les membres détiennent collectivement la plupart des fonctions politiques du royaume.

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