

## MYTHS AS HISTORY: A CRITIQUE OF THE TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN OF NIGERIAN ETHNIC GROUPS

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Historical consciousness has necessitated the need for the various Nigerian ethnic groups to find their roots, i.e. to trace their origins. Conscious efforts have been made to realise this aim. For example, in 1956, the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme was launched by the government of the then Western Region, and was charged with the task of writing "an authentic history of the Yoruba peoples from the earliest ascertainable time to the present, using all the modern techniques of recapturing the history of a non-literate society."<sup>1</sup>

This awareness of the need to produce a history has led to the proliferation of myths and legends seeking to explain how a group came to be what they are in Nigeria. The introduction of the art of writing, both in Arabic and western forms, has aided the reduction of these traditions into written form, and it is in this category that we have the works of people such as Samuel Johnson and Jacob Egharevba.<sup>2</sup> These works are products of oral tradition and as such susceptible to the flaws inherent in oral traditions generally. All legends contain a core of history, a kernel of truth that has been suppressed, and the duty of the historian, explains S.O. Biobaku, "is to penetrate beyond the succulent pericarp of invention and crack the hard kernel of historical event, however little. While we disbelieve the legend we must ascertain the historical event which gave rise to it."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, this is why Biobaku comments that "the problem of origins is a fascinating one."<sup>4</sup>

1 S.O. Biobaku (Ed.) *Sources of Yoruba History* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1973) p. V.

2 Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos, C.S.S. Repr. 1973); J.U. Egharevba *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan, 1960).

3 S.O. Biobaku, *The Origin of the Yoruba*, Lugard Lectures, (Lagos, 1955, and University of Lagos Press, 1971), p. 13.

4 *Ibid*, p. 5.

A noticeable flaw prevalent in traditions seeking to explain the roots of an ethnic group is that they end at the point where the current ruling group assumed effective political control. Often times the traditions then continue at a much later date, usually in the 18th and 19th Centuries. This is a deficiency which creates a time gap in these stories which in several cases are difficult to fill. This is particularly the case when the growth of a particular town is not synonymous with that of the ethnic group. Also traditions of origin may end with the dispersals of different sections of an ethnic group to form different towns, each developing in its own way. In the light of this, and since tradition says little of the growth of the ethnic group in general, this paper focuses attention mainly on traditions that deal with origins. In view of the multiplicity of ethnic groups in the country, the approach adopted here is to illustrate our points with a few of the myths of origin, especially those that are already well known.

One prevalent feature in the traditions is the emphasis on creation stories. The legends of creation attribute the beginning of the whole world to the origins of particular ethnic groups. The traditions relate that after the world was created in their areas, the remaining peoples of the world moved out to their present areas. These stories of creation are fast becoming objects of historical research as "historians are increasingly sceptical about traditions of lengthy migration..."<sup>5</sup>. This trend is discernible in Igbo traditions of origin. An Igbo old man recently asserted: "we do not come from anywhere and anyone who tells you we came from anywhere is a liar..."<sup>6</sup>. The Edo legend relates how Osanobua (the supreme god of the Edo) had seven children, commissioned them to do various works and sent the youngest with a snail shell filled with sand to create dryland on some primeval flood. The Yoruba has a similar story. The traditions which talk of creation do agree in tracing descent from Oduduwa but do not refer to a migration from elsewhere. Oduduwa has been put in these myths as the son of *Olodumare*, the supreme god of the Yoruba. It is said that *Olodumare* let down Oduduwa from heaven with a chain to create the earth where there was previously only water. His first place of landing was Ile-Ife, and it was from there that other parts of Yorubaland and indeed the whole world were created.

It is not definite yet what importance can be attached to legends talking of creation. When the Yoruba creation story is viewed critically, we may see that the story is probably nothing more than a mystification of the special position of Ile-Ife in Yorubaland. It is also possible to interpret

5 Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Igbo People* (London, Macmillan, 1976), p. 3.

6 Onuora Duni of Nguru, age, C. 90, transcribed in L.O.Mwahiri, "Nguru Mabise Before the Coming of the British" B.A. History Special Project, Nsukka, 1973 p. 55; cited in E. Isichei, *A History ... op. cit.*

it as a claim to an autochthonous status. Ife is generally referred to in the literature as "Ile-Ife, Ile-Owuro, Ile-Ife Oodaiye ni bi ti ojumo ti mo wa, Ile-Ife ori aiye gbogbo" (Ile-Ife the land of the most ancient days – the dawn. Ile-Ife where the work of creation took place, where the dawn of day was first experienced, Ile-Ife the head, or nucleus, of the whole universe)<sup>7</sup>. Certainly, Ife traditions recognise two distinct periods of human history, the pre-Oduduwa and Oduduwa periods.<sup>8</sup> When the creation story is taken alongside with other legends of the origin of the Yoruba, especially the legends of migration, it can be said that the different myths refer to different elements in the population with the Ife legend of creation referring to the autochthonous elements. We can conclude that it is in the attempt to explain off the co-existence of aboriginal or autochthonous inhabitants and the predominant migrant elements in the society that the creation stories were invented. This view will apply to all other legends seeking to explain the origins of a people by claiming descent from heaven and making their place the beginning of the world. It applies to the Edo and Igbo creation stories. The Igbo claim as asserted earlier is probably a bit sentimental and overlooks the coming of migrant settlers; prominence has been placed on aborigines, but there are other Igbo traditions which relate of immigrant settlers from outside of the area.

Another common feature of the myths is the emphasis on migration stories. In most societies the ruling elements or the predominant class are taken as the 'ancestors' of the groups and the traditions try to buttress the importance of these groups. The leader of the migrant group is usually referred to as the 'dynastic ancestor' of the group. An interesting aspect is that most dynastic ancestors are said to have migrated from distant places outside Nigeria. The leaders are often referred to as princes, courtiers, political aspirants who lost contests in those distant places, and the original homes are usually associated with some important places usually in the Middle East. The Middle East is the home of the most important religions in the world including Judaism, Bhudaism, Christianity and Islam. It is plausible and honourable to claim that their ancestors came from these religions and civilized areas. The Yoruba claim Mecca, and some of their traditions say that they have relations with Noah's family; the Hausa claim Baghdad; and Sayf, the founder of the Saifawa dynasty in Borno is often described as a member of the Kuraish royal family in Mecca. The coming of these various migrant elements is also usually associated with political developments – usually, the emergence of the ruling aristocracy. The Hausa and the Yoruba legends of migration are good examples that illustrate very

well these features. The Danra story<sup>9</sup> relates of the career of Bayajidda Abu Yazid, son of King Abdullahi of Baghdad. Following his flight from Baghdad he sojourned for a while in Kanem where he married a daughter of the Mai, before proceeding to Hausaland (when he took flight from Kanem). On arrival in Hausaland his hostess could not procure water for him because, as she explained, a snake in the well where water could be fetched prevented people from doing so. Abu Yazid killed the snake, in return for which he was offered half the kingdom which he rejected preferring to marry the queen. Eventually, he had a child called Bawo who had three sets of twins, namely, Gazoro and Bagauda, Gunguma and Duma, and Kumayo and Zamma, who along with the brother of Bawo, Biram, became the ancestors of the seven 'pure' Hausa States today. Bawo also had seven other children produced for him by some 'local' women who became ancestors of the seven Hausa 'banza' States.

The Daura legend is a very good representation of migration stories. It contains, when properly interpreted, the salient features common to most legends of migration. In the first place, the ancestor, Bayajidda Abu Yazid is described as a 'prince' (son of the king of Baghdad) and came from a distant popular place in the Middle-East, Baghdad. One may ask, why claim Baghdad? This is probably because at the time the Hausa states attracted notice, Islam was well-known in Hausaland and the most prominent Islamic civilization at the time was that of the Abbasid Dynasty based in Baghdad. It is natural to claim descent from that famous Muslim State. But in seeking the origin of Abu Yazid the issue has been raised whether the said Abu Yazid had any connexion with Abu Yazid Ibn Maklad Ibn Kidad, a Berber historic figure, born and bred in Tadmekket about 880 A.D. who raised a revolt against the Fatimid rulers of present-day Tunis between 940 and 947 A.D.. The revolt was crushed and he was caught and executed. His followers scattered in all directions with many of them escaping as far South as the bays of the Sahara in Kanem and Northern parts of Hausaland. Everywhere they went and over many decades they presumably kept memories of their leader and hero Abu Yazid Ibn Maklad Ibn Kidad, who also became an integral part of local folklore.<sup>10</sup> In any case whether the original home of Abu Yazid has been traced or not, the fact remains that the Hausas as expressed in the Daura legend, have found solace in claiming descent from not only a distant and popular place, but also a religious place.

7 J. A. Ademakinwa, *Ife, Cradle of the Yoruba* (Lagos, 1953), part I, p. 12;  
8 Biodun Adediran, "States – Formation in Yorubaland: Towards a Working Hypothesis", Departmental Seminar, History Dept., Univ. of Ife, 10 Dec. 1980, p. 6.

9 The full story is recorded in Isola Olomola, 'The Hausa States' in Toyin Falola and A. Adediran (Editors) *A History of Nigeria*, Vol. 1 (John West 1983) pp. 127-130. Another version is recorded in Thomas Hodgkin *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 1975) pp. 54-56.  
10 *Ibid*, pp. 130-131.

Another feature found in migration legends relates to the establishment of political authority by a dynasty and other notable political developments. Usually, with migration stories are those pertaining to the evolution of political institutions and supplanting of earlier government. In the Daura legend it is said that Abu Yazid fled from the Court of the *Mai*. It is not improbable that he was politically ambitious and that he fled after an abortive attempt at seizing political power. Also it is stated that in Hausaland he was offered half the kingdom which he rejected preferring to marry the queen instead which would make him possess the whole kingdom. The traditions are often silent on the measures taken to establish effective political control.

One can say the same for the migration legend of the Yoruba which also links descent to a popular place. The migration legend exists in many variants; but it has been pointed out by Ulli Beier that several variants make no claim to origin from Mecca, but speak merely of a migration beyond a great river (the Niger). Beier argued that this makes it likely that the claim of origin from Mecca is not an original element of the traditions, but a later elaboration intended to link the Yoruba to the prestigious civilizations of the east, when Mecca became known through Oyo's contacts with the Muslim north.<sup>11</sup>

Claiming descent from the "East" is not peculiar to the Hausa and the Yoruba. Similar claims to origin from the east occur in the origin legends of ethnic groups in the Middle Belt. Most of the legends belong to the "Kisra" legend group, all claiming descent from one Kisra who, like Oduduwa his alleged nephew, was driven out of Mecca for opposing Islam.<sup>12</sup> The Borgu version has it that Kisra migrated westwards from Arabia following the emergence of Islam. After a journey full of trials and tribulations he arrived around Lake Chad where he sojourned for a brief period before leading his people in a South Westerly direction to the banks of River Niger. "Agadu" is the name given as the head of the migrant group from Mecca in the Jukun version of the same legend. This has given the impression that many Nigerian peoples, especially those in the north, belong to the Kisra complex.<sup>13</sup>

11 S.O. Biobaku, *Sources... op. cit.*, p. 30.

12 *Ibid.*

13 A.A. Adediran, "The State of the Middle Belt" in Falola and Adediran (eds.) *A History... op. cit.*, pp. 148-150. See also, M. Crowder, *Revolt in Bussa* (Faber & Faber, 1973) pp. 26-35 for the Borgu variant, and O.K. Meek, *A Sudanese Kingdom*, (London, 1931) on Jukun. For a discussion on the 'Kisra Legend' see, A.B. Mathews, "The Kisra Legend", *African Studies*, Vol. 9 No. III pp. 144-7 and Phillips Stevens, (Jr.), "The Kisra Legend and the Disposition of Historical Tradition", *Journal of African History (JAH)* Vol. 14 No. II, 1975) pp. 185-200.

All the legends try to suppress events relating to the conquests or defeat of the alleged founders of the ethnic groups. As earlier mentioned, most legends about eponymous ancestors actually talk of migration and migrants. In most cases the migrants took over control of the administration and established dynasties and ruling groups. In several cases the take-over of government was through wars. But to suppress this "bad" side of the story, fabrications have been concocted to ignore protracted wars. The Bayajidda legend can be used as an illustration here. It has been established that the hero — Bayajidda Abu Yazid — had political ambitions, and this was reflected in his lack of interest in taking half of the kingdom in preference for marrying the Queen. This marriage would have made him the *de facto* ruler of the whole kingdom. But there are other issues to consider. It has specifically been said in the legend that Bayajidda arrived on a donkey (horse?); what do we make of this? Do we accept it on the face value and agree that Bayajidda the traveller arrived on horseback? In the first instance, it must be noted that the activities associated with Bayajidda must in fact represent more than the adventures of one man but that of a wave of migrants possibly the first in a series. This first group must have arrived in Daura where the earliest encounter with the autochthonous elements, military or otherwise, might have taken place, and from there other groups must have taken advantage to make incursions into the surrounding countryside, (that is, where the offsprings of Bawo were said to have founded). The arrival of Bayajidda on horseback would in that case be referring to a group of invaders arriving on horsebacks, and their use of calvary in an area where probably they had never seen such would have created fear in the minds of the aborigines who were easily subdued. That the invading groups were better armed is shown in the legend in the attack and killing of the snake. The weapon used was described as a sword. It has been established that perhaps there existed in Hausaland then the use of cutlasses and knives, and in this case it would mean that the invading immigrant aristocratic groups introduced more effective and lethal weapons of war, of offence and defence into the region and along with their calvary revolutionized warfare in Hausaland. The snake that was killed also has some historical evidence of its own. It perhaps might have been a totem worshipped by the people. Its killing therefore might have signified the destruction of indigenous religion. But the snake was given the name Zarki, which might mean ruler. In that case the invading hero or heroes might have fought a tyrannous ruling clique, destroyed its leader who had been feared by the people and thus put an end to a reign of terror. Impressed by the action the queen (or the assumed leader) offered them half the kingdom, but the conquerors took the whole kingdom by right of conquest.<sup>14</sup>

14 I. Olomola, 'The Hausa States' *op. cit.* pp. 132-134.

Another example of a legend which suppresses the conquest element in the ascendance of the ruling dynasty is that of Benin. A version of the Edo legends relates how some immigrant settlers left Egypt around 750 A.D. (again that trend of claiming descent from a popular place – starting point of civilization), passed through Sudan, Ile-Ife and arrived at the present-day Benin where they founded the Igodo communities. The last of the Igodo rulers (Obagodo/Ogiso), Owodo, had a son, Ekaladerhan, a well-behaved well-loved son who was banished and later settled at Gwatto (Ugotton) as a fugitive. After the death of Evion the elders invited Ekaladerhan to be king but he was afraid and ran to Ile-Ife for safety, became the king of the local people at Ile-Ife, begot children and Oduduwa was his eldest son. When emissaries of Edo leaders came to him, he gave orders to Oduduwa to respond to them. Invariably Oduduwa sent Oranmiyan his own son. In that case, Oranmiyan who established the dynasty at Benin was a grandson of Ekaladerhan and a great-grandson of Owodo, the last of the Ogisos. This version continues by saying that the elders of Benin escorted him to Usama where problems arose and he could not enter Benin. After patiently waiting for some time, he became annoyed and travelled back to Ile-Ife. But he already had a child, Eweka whom he left to rule Benin.<sup>15</sup>

If Oranmiyan was invited by the elders of Benin who were the lords of the Igodomigodo, and led him as far as Usama and were unable to lead him to Benin City itself, the story may not be as plausible as it sounds. It is therefore supposed that because Oranmiyan was known as a restless prince, warlike and courageous, (all traditions surrounding him portray him as an adventurer) he went to the place uninvited and settled to rule over the areas he had successfully invaded, hoping to continue the conquest at some future time. But when the good time never came, he became desperate and probably annoyed which was perhaps why he called the place "Ile-Ibinu", "a land of vexation". Perhaps one may ask, why do the new ruler about to ascend the throne customarily would have to engage a descendant of the Ogiso in a shadow wrestling contest in which he must win? Certainly, certain pieces of information have been suppressed.

A final note on legends of migration even when the myth of migration is accepted as fundamentally historical, it should not be seen as relating to a whole ethnic group. Numerous myths abound in various ethnic groups

15 Versions of the origin of the new dynasty in Benin abound. They are related in, J.U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan University Press, 1968), A.A. Adediran: "The Benin Empire", op. cit. pp. 209-230. Also see, A.F.C. Ryder: "The Benin Kingdom" in Obaro Ikime (ed.); *Groundwork of Nigeria History*, (Heinemann, 1980) pp. 109-120.

that refer to the existence of previous or autochthonous elements in every society.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us to another feature found among legends of origin: a tradition of origin justifies the realities of the time it emerged, that is, present – day realities. For instance, the Yoruba tradition of migration from Mecca is an Oyo-Yoruba based tradition. A part of the tradition says, "It is stated... that Oramiyan was the youngest of Oduduwa's children, but eventually he became the richest and most renowned of them all. How this came about is related in the tradition thus: "On the death of the king, their grandfather, his property was unequally divided among his children as follows:—

"The King of Benin inherited his money (consisting of cowry shells), the Orangun of Ila his wives, the king of Sabe his cattle, the Olupopo the beads, the Olowu the garments, and the Alaketu the crowns, and nothing was left for Oranyan but the land. Some assert that he was on a warlike expedition when the partition was made, and so he was shut out of all movable properties. Oranyan was, however, satisfied with his portion, which he proceeded forthwith to turn to good account with the utmost skill. He held his brothers as tenants living on the land which was his, for rents he received money, women, cattle, beads, garments, and crowns, which were his brothers' portions, as all these were more or less dependent on the soil, and were deriving sustenance from it. And he was the one selected to succeed the father as king is direct line of succession. To his brothers were assigned the various provinces over which they rule more or less independently, Oranyan himself being placed on the throne as the ALAFIN or Lord of the Royal Palace at Ile-Ife".<sup>17</sup>

Written at a time when Oyo was the major kingdom in Yorubaland, the tradition is merely trying to justify why Oyo (kingdom) was the largest. Or how would one account for why somebody took the beads, another the garments, and yet another the cattle, all leaving the land free? All we can make of this tradition is probably that it accounts for why Benin was a rich kingdom and the Orangun probably a lover of women and the expanse of Oyo territories. Written at a time when Oyo was about the largest empire in Yorubaland, it would appear that the tradition is a justification of the

16 This is especially the case among the Yoruba where numerous legends talk of pre-migrant layers in various towns. Works like M.B. Ashara, *History of Owo* (Owo, 1951), S.O. Arifalo, "An Analysis and comparison of the Legends of Origin of Akure (University of Ife, Original Essay, B.A. special Honours in History, 1966) and O.T. Akinrinade "An Analysis of the Legends or Origins of Origbo Towns" (University of Ife, Research Essay, B.A. Special Honours in History, 1981), on Owo, Akure and Origbo peoples respectively adequately demonstrate this view.

17 Samuel Johnson. *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos, C.S.S. 1976) pp. 8-9.

sway Oyo was holding over other territories. In the same vein, the traditions of origin extant among the Igala reflect different sources of origin. The tradition that links them with the Jukun in the highest probability arose when they were under Jukun hegemony; the one linking them with Benin came at the time of Benin ascendancy – they all try to justify the different phases of political domination in Igalaland.

Perhaps related with the above is the attempt by some traditions to graft certain elements found in other legends on their own. This is especially the case when certain ethnic group had once been under the influence of another group. In the case of Benin, this has been referred to by G. A. Akinola as "received traditions"<sup>18</sup>. In the Benin tradition earlier mentioned, an attempt is made to include the Oduduwa legend in the Benin story. The connections of Ife with Benin is a popular theme in Nigerian history. Both Ife and Benin recognize this claim in their traditions. In the story of the origin of the Yoruba, reference is made to Benin<sup>19</sup> where the *Oba* is referred to as one of the children of Oduduwa, while the connection with Ife is referred to in the Benin story above. This feature of grafting is also common in the states of the middle belt where almost every ethnic group claims descent from one Kisra from the 'East'. It would appear that the Kisra Complex is prevalent among a people who in all probability came under a certain influence. It would not be out of place to suggest the Islamic influence, more so when the Kisra tradition is more often than not associated with the Islamic religion.

Another interesting aspect of myths on origin is that the quest to know the past often give rise to deliberate invention of stories. The stories so produced in this process do reflect the mind of the "legend – manufacturers". The legends show what the users want them to show, and in the end different legends on the same story are produced reflecting different and sometimes contrasting positions on the same issue. A good example is the attempts at reconstructing the history of Igbo people. Like most African societies, the Igbo did not evolve the art of writing to any considerable extent (apart from the indigenous handwriting known as *Nsibidi* which was perhaps used only by the secret societies) and so did not keep any written account of their past. Consequently, there is very little direct evidence on the Igbo political institutions and how they operated in pre-colonial, pre-literate times.

Speculations concerning the origin of the Igbo people have engaged the attention of both the Igbo themselves, and some British officials who served in Igboland during the colonial period. Naturally, the Igbo were

interested in their origin because they are anxious to discover where they came from and to reconstruct how they came to be what they are. They were also interested in preserving their group identity and to authenticate it. The British officials on their part became interested in Igbo history partly to provide explanation for certain mental, psychological, linguistic and other characteristics which they consider peculiar to the Igbo, and mainly to understand the Igbo and their society as one of the steps towards evolving suitable methods of ruling them. In a way, the circumstances for the two groups differ and it has affected the type of history they produced. For the two groups there was an agreement on their methods and conclusions. They depended on the "culture traits chasing" method, that is, looking for and finding aspects of Igbo culture which they thought would give indications of either their origins or of the origins of their culture.

In general both schools of thought have come to the conclusion either that the Igbo came from the "East" or that their culture evolved under the influence of some culture-carriers from the East – Egypt and the Holy Land have usually been mentioned. Basing his argument on the fact that the Igbo practised circumcision, name their babies after some special events, and insisted on seclusion and purification of women after childbirth, Olaudah Equiano concluded that the Igbo were most likely one of the lost tribes of Israel.<sup>20</sup> Supporting this view, Basden, a European, examined certain constructions found in Igbo language and what he considered the deep religious nature of the people, and concluded that the Igbo culture probably evolved under the influence of the Levitical Code<sup>21</sup>, and tries to explain their cultural history in terms of Jewish influence.<sup>22</sup> Impressed by the Igbo Sun-worship and other aspects of Igbo religion and by the feature of dual organization in their social structure, M.D.W. Jeffreys held that the Igbo at some stage in their history came under Egyptian influence, the carriers of the influence probably being the Nri of Awka in Northern Igboland.<sup>23</sup> Apart from Equiano, some other Igbo writers have claimed Hebrew or Egyptian origin. These included K.E. Ijeomanta who traced Aro origin to the Nile Valley and Akwaelumo Ike who claimed that the Igbo are Jews and that the word "Ibo" is a corruption of the word "Hebrew".<sup>24</sup> With regard to the aims of the two schools of thought, that

20 Olaudah Equiano; *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa The African* (London, 1789) (abridged and edited by Paul Edwards as *Equiano's Travels* (Heinemann, 1967).

21 Basden, G.T. *Niger Igbo*, (London, 1965).

22 A.E. Afigbo, "Igboland Before 1800" in O. Ikime (Ed.)-Groundwork... op. cit. p. 73.

23 M.D.W. Jeffreys, "Dual Organization In Africa", *African Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June 1946; cited in A.E. Afigbo, *Ibid*.

24 See A.E. Afigbo, "Igboland Before 1800" op. cit. p. 73, especially footnote 3.

18 G.A. Akinola, "The Origin of the Eweka Dynasty of Benin. A Study In the Use and Abuse of Oral Traditions". *JHSN*, Vol. VIII, No. 3, Dec. 1976.

19 See Samuel Johnson, *The History... op. cit.* p. 5.

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20 Olaudah Equiano; *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa The African* (London, 1789) (abridged and edited by Paul Edwards as *Equiano's Travels* (Heinemann, 1967).

21 Basden, G.T. *Niger Igbos*, (London, 1965).

22 A.E. Afigbo, "Igboland Before 1800" in O. Ikime (Ed.)-Groundwork... op. cit. p. 73.

23 M.D.W. Jeffreys, "Dual Organization In Africa", *African Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June 1946; cited in A.E. Afigbo, *Ibid*.

24 See A.E. Afigbo, "Igboland Before 1800" op. cit. p. 73, especially footnote 3.

18 G.A. Akinola, "The Origin of the Eweka Dynasty of Benin. A Study In the Use and Abuse of Oral Traditions". *JHSN*, Vol. VIII, No. 3, Dec. 1976.

19 See Samuel Johnson, *The History...* op. cit. p. 5.

is, Igbo and British, they hoped to use the "Eastern" hypothesis to unravel the mysteries of Igbo past. Beyond this they did not agree in line with what has earlier been mentioned, the circumstances of need, already coloured the type of conclusions reached by the various writers. Olaudah Equiano, for instance, who first claimed the Eastern origin for his people was concerned with the dismal lot of the blackman, his utter helplessness in the face of Europe, his enslavement and misery. He wondered whether this has always been so or whether the situation would ever change (It should be noted that Olaudah Equiano himself was an ex-slave; he was given the name Gustavus Vassa by his master. He later bought his freedom). It was partly in dealing with these issues that the claimed Jewish ancestry for his people. He believed that the Igbo were originally a branch of the Jews whose culture gave rise to christianity, which later civilized primitive Europe. Since it was generally believed that the Orient was the civilizer of mankind, the Igbo took on the claim of the Eastern origin, and came to arrogate to themselves a higher place in history of the world than they would assign to their British masters. On the other hand, the British officials continued to argue that the Igbo were once under Egyptian influence, that the spread of Egyptian culture in Igboland was the work of a small elite who after inter-breeding with the people became the Nri of Aro today, and that if the British officials were to rule Igboland indirectly they had to do this through the Aro. They were under the impression that this would not be new since the Igbo had always been ruled by "aliens".

The Igbo example as shown above has produced a history for the Igbo which has been coloured by the circumstances of need. The two groups have found it convenient to claim "Eastern" origins for the people but they sought to use this to justify different things. This has gone to show that the same story can be twisted to serve different purposes. Traditions keep changin over the period in response to changes and contemporary issues. But some stories do not change, the major difference could be in the embellishments. But in the Igbo case, the difference is in the use to which the traditions have been put.

A very rare thing to come across when looking at traditions of origins is for a particular group to have only a common legend which has been almost unanimously accepted by all sections of that ethnic group. This has been the case among the Nupe. Although there exists a myriad of oral traditions talking about Nupe origins, all of them agree in essentials. The earliest history of the Nupe has been woven around the figure of one Tsoede, also known as Edegi. Tsoede was to the Nupe what Oduduwa was to the Yoruba. The traditions relate that he was born sometimes in the 15th century (a relatively young date which probably accounts for why the traditions agree). According to the traditions, there was no Nupe kingdom at first but tiny chiefdoms which were united in a kind of confederacy under the

chief of Nku, a village near the confluence of the Niger and Kaduna rivers.<sup>25</sup> As for the facts of the foundation of Nupe itself, they contain many features common in oral traditions – legends, myths and embellishments. But the sum total of these stories has lent some form of credibility to the myth that finally emerged.

## Conclusion

Tracing origins through the use of myths has never proved to be an easy task and this is largely because myths are by nature easily subject to distortions. A myriad of traditions exist all over the country to explain the origins of one ethnic group or the other. This paper has tried to make some sense out of some of these traditions by looking at the features prevalent in many of them. "It is clear that legends specifically concerned with the origins are especially liable to distortion, or even to pure fabrication while they may preserve a genuine tradition of how the present state of affairs arose, they may equally be merely ingenious speculations or rationalizations. Moreover, origin myths are frequently tendentious, and suffer distortion for ulterior purposes, seeking to validate claims to superiority or suzerainty, or to friendship or community. But to say this is not to deny that materials of historical value may not be derived from such myths, providing rational principles of evaluation are employed."<sup>26</sup>

- 25 The traditions have been synthesized by S.F. Nadel in his *A Black Byzantium: The Kingdom of Nupe In Nigeria* (International African Institute, London, 1942). A very useful part dealing with the tradition of origin is included in T. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, op. cit. pp. 106-108.
- 26 R.C.C. Law; "Contemporary Writer Sources" in S.O. Biobaku *Sources of Yoruba History* op. cit, p. 29.