

SUICIDE IN YORUBA CULTURE

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Introduction

The main focus of this paper is the various connotations of suicide among the Yoruba in the pre-colonial era. In this exercise, my working hypothesis is Farberow's definition of the word suicide as 'self-initiated and self-inflicted murder'.¹ My interest in the subject emanates from my study (for doctoral dissertation) of the culture history of the Yoruba in pre-colonial times undertaken between 1974 and 1977. Thus, as a historian, my main concern in this paper is not the scientific or philosophical, clinical or psychological aspects of suicide but the conventional attitudes of the Yoruba to the subject.

The period under reference dates from unknown antiquity and ends with the effective establishment of British colonial rule at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, colonial rule itself was the culmination of half a century of christian missionary endeavour to establish the christian

¹ Farberow, N.L. (ed.) *Suicide in different cultures* (Baltimore, London, etc. University Park Press, 1975) Introduction p. xii.

faith and culture among the Yoruba² and the British commercial firms' and chartered companies' endeavours to establish the British presence as a necessary protection for their ventures.³ Thus, a combination of forces mustered by these groups culminated in the establishment of British colonial rule over the then war-torn Yoruba kingdoms. During the colonial era, the British proscribed many indigenous Yoruba conventional rules and practices.⁴ The result was that many of the beliefs and practices of the Yoruba which necessitated human sacrifice, slavery, trial by ordeal and other constituents of Yoruba culture which conflicted with the Euro-christian culture of the British were swept away. Modern industrialization gradually set in during and after colonial rule and the attendant increased geographical and social mobility led to the gradual but steady breakdown of Yoruba communalism and bred unemployment and lack of proper integration of the depressed members of the various communities.

Generally speaking, the Yoruba abhor suicide and express very strong moral disapproval of it, yet, powerful conventional rules and practices uphold and extol some categories of suicide. Herein lies the paradox and, the casual observer is likely to mistake one of the two positions as representing the attitude of the Yoruba on the question of suicide. The point is that the Yoruba abhor some categories of suicide and at the same time extol some; the lines separating both categories are clearly drawn to prevent possible confusion.

Conceivably the episodes highlighted for discussion and illustration in this paper happened before 1900, the only exception being the suicide in 1946 of the Alafin's (king of Oyo) unnamed master of the horse. Therefore, my sources of information include oral traditions, records compiled by

- 2 Oduyoye, M. *The planting of Christianity in Yorubaland* (Ibadan, Daystar Press, 1969) p. 31 Kopytoff, J.H., *A preface to modern Nigeria: the 'Sierra Leonians' in Yoruba, 1830-1890* (Madison & London, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965) pp. 59 & 80. Ayandele, E.A. *Missionary impact on modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: a political and social analysis* (London, Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd. 1966) pp. 3-16.
- 3 Nzoigwe, G.N. *Britain and the conquest of Africa: the age of Salisbury* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1974) pp. 65-119. Vandeleur, S. *Campaigning on the Upper Nile and Niger* (London, Methven & Co. 1898) pp. 176-177.
- 4 Johnson, S., *The history of the Yorubas* (Lagos, C.S.S. Bookshops, 1969) pp. 663-667, *Western Equatorial Africa Church magazine* representing the Dioceses of Lagos and the Niger, June, 1921, p. 151, Dec. 1928, pp. 225-226. March, 1932, p. 61.

European explorers, missionaries and colonial officers. Of course evidence is obtained from literary and academic works produced by expatriate and Nigerian ethnographers and historians. The Yoruba were non-literate before the middle of the nineteenth century when christian missionaries began evangelical work among them⁵ and western education was popularly adopted by the Yoruba only in the early decades of the twentieth century. Therefore, for much of their history the Yoruba preserved information about their culture in oral traditions, a general term for their myths, folktales, songs, proverbs and ritual ceremonies. As a result, suicide rates and statistics among the Yoruba are underreported because of the cultural inhibitions involved and in the case of the 'egoistic' and 'anomic' suicides because of the need to protect their surviving families and friends from the shame associated with these.

Customary therapeutic resources

It is necessary to delve briefly into Yoruba communalism in pre-colonial times in order to bring into focus the place of the individual citizen. The smallest social unit was the family; it consisted of a father, *baba*, or husband, *oko*, mother, *iya*, or wife *aya* and the children, *mo*. Children were ranked elder, *egbon*, and junior, *aburo*. The Yoruba were, and to a large extent still are a polygamous people and a sub-unit usually existed in each polygamous family. Children of the common father were called *obakan* while those of each wife or mother were called, *omiye*.⁶ Numerous families constituted the lineage, *ebi*. An *Ebi* consisted of persons who have directly descended in the male line from a common ancestor while all those who descended from this same common ancestor but through different fathers and mothers were called *ibatán*. The elder and junior relationship which existed amongst the original children of the common ancestor were preserved among all subsequent descendants and this arrangement was largely responsible for all pervading respect the

Yoruba had (and still have to a large extent) for custom and for the stability of all impersonal relationships among all and sundry.⁷

This shows that kinsmen among the Yoruba consisted (and still consist) of members of the lineage, the lineal and collateral relations and, indeed, everyone to whom an individual is related. Kinsmen also include affinal relatives consisting of members of the lineage of the individual's spouse. The advantages accruing to the individual from his kinsmen were many. As pointed out by Lloyd, the size of one's kin enhanced one's social and political importance and the more economically and socially important a man was, the larger his circle of kins.⁸ This situation still remains the same and has been summarized by Adepoju a poet who has described the numerous occasions – of marriage, naming, chieftaincy and burial ceremonies – when kinsmen honour their relatives with their presence and support them materially.⁹ Of course kinsmen also support one another in time of crises.

A vast majority of the Yoruba lived out their lives among their kinsmen and relatives, usually in large compounds¹⁰ each consisting of numerous families made up of old men, their wives and grown-up sons and their own wives, some three generations or more of grandparents, children and grandchildren. The Yoruba did not usually remove themselves from their roots. Although the history of the Yoruba is replete with numerous cases of internal migrations yet, the migrant princes, chiefs and even common citizens were usually followed in self exile and settlement by large numbers of partisans who were the migrants' kinsmen and relatives.¹¹ Relations with the old homeland generally remained constant and the host communities usually made the immigrant settlers welcome. Thus, people never lacked relatives with whom they shared intimate feelings in times of joy and sorrow.

⁵ Delano, I.O. *The Soul of Nigeria* (London, T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1937) p. 196; Atanda, J.A., *The New Oyo Empire; indirect rule and change in Western Nigeria, 1894-1934* (London, Longman Group Ltd., 1973) p. 51, R. Law, 'The northern factor in Yoruba history' in *The Proceedings of the conference on Yoruba civilization held at the University of Ife, Nigeria 26th-31st July, 1976*, (eds) I.A. Akinjogbin and G.O. Ekemode, p. 107.
⁶ Lloyd, P.C. *Yoruba Land Law* (London, O.U.P. 1964) p. 281.

⁷ Fadipe, N.A. *The sociology of Yoruba* (ed) F.O. Okediji and O.O. Okediji (Ibadan University Press, 1970) p. 128.

⁸ Lloyd, P.C. *Yoruba Land Law*, op. cit., p. 118.

⁹ Stone, Rev. R.H. *In Africa's forest and jungle* (London Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, 1900) pp. 25-27; Bowen, T.J. *Adventures and missionary labours in several countries in the interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856* (Charleston & Co. Ltda., 1968) pp. 297-298.

¹⁰ Adepoju, L. *Ironu Akewi* (Ibadan, Onibonoje Press and Book Industries (Nigeria) Ltd., 1972) pp. 12-13.

¹¹ Lloyd, P.C. *Yoruba Land Law*, op. cit. pp. 195-196. Ekundare, M. *Iwe Itan adugbo kokan to wa ninu ilu Ilesha* (Ilesha Oladiran Liberty Press, 1966) pp. 4, 17, 18 & 26; Asabia D.O. & J.O. Adegbesan *Idoani past and present 'Pre-Colonial Patterns of inter-state relations in eastern Yorubaland'* Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Ife, Nigeria, May 1977, pp. 53-60.

In the circumstances, the therapeutic resources available to the Yoruba were immense. In the first place, members of each household or compound took care of their people at all times and their constant support provided the necessary assurance against problems of old age, unexpected illness and disaster.¹² Even, lepers lived among their kinsmen, mixed freely among all and sundry and raised their own families. No one was unemployed in the largely rural and agrarian communities and everyone enjoyed abundance. No one was left to himself and anyone, a kinsman or even a stranger in the sulks or who was wearing sullen looks was asked what the matter was with him and the verbal ventilations that usually followed helped to some extent to assuage his feelings. Thus, Durkheim's first category of suicide, the egoistic¹³ common among individuals who are not properly integrated into their society but are thrown on their own resources and living their own lives to their hearts' content was unknown among the Yoruba. Living together in large numbers and looking after individual member's welfare protected the Yoruba from impulses to suicide.

However, Durkheim's third category of suicide, the anomic,¹⁴ resulting from a feeling of extreme alienation coupled with utter despair and a sense of defeat prevailed among the Yoruba. But a sudden change in an individual's position or distress usually led him to suicide where the person concerned was obdurate and utterly incorrigible. The Yoruba called this tendency among individuals *arangbo* and the person, *alarangbo*. The Yoruba commonly say '*tite ni alarangbo nte*'¹⁵ meaning, an incorrigible person shall surely come to shame. For a situation in which an individual's world was destroyed around him and was rendered unable to cope with the new situation usually came about only when kinsmen and relatives had laboured and failed to rehabilitate him. For instance, divorce did not exist in the Yoruba marriage culture.¹⁶ Marriage involved families and the woman was completely integrated into the family of her husband. Separation of spouses was out of the question. Where the husband predeceased his wife or wives, these women were usually inherited by

male relations who were younger than the deceased husbands, and the new husbands had responsibilities for the women and their children. Widows suffered no social isolation and unnecessary despair. There were no broken homes, and children, including orphans suffered no untold neglect. Barren women, or women predeceased by all their children were accommodated with considerable sympathy by age mates of their children and of course by their kinsmen. Life was rural and simple, when not engaged in the farms or in the crafts, the Yoruba spent their time in communal activities and merriment. In the 1850's Clarke, the American Baptist missionary visiting Abeokuta, Ijaye, Oyo, Ogbomosho, Ijesaland and Ila remarked that the Yoruba 'are emphatically social people, strong in their attachments, ardent in their friendships, fond of life, hilarity and amusements.'¹⁷ This remark applies to all Yoruba communities because the various sub-ethnic groups of the Yoruba are culturally homogeneous.

Yoruba conception of death and post-death

The second aspect of Yoruba culture to consider in relation to suicide is the Yoruba beliefs regarding death. The Yoruba were polytheists,¹⁸ they believed in the existence of an omnipotent God, who was called *Olorun*, owner of heaven, and *Abarisa* father of all gods. The other gods and goddesses were called *orisa*; these consisted mainly supernatural beings and deified local heroes. The Yoruba believed that the Supreme God lived in remotest heaven called, *orun ajinjin*, and his children the lesser gods and goddesses inhabited immediate heaven called *orun alakeji*.¹⁹ All the dead ancestors were believed to live in this immediate heaven and therefore, they too were regarded as gods. As rightly reported by Talbot concerning the people of the Niger Delta that the ancestral shades play their part in the life of the community passing at will from one place to another and helping in.....mundane matters²⁰ the dead ancestors among the Yoruba were said to continue to protect the interests of their living offsprings. The Yoruba thus conceived of the dead ancestors as occupying

12 Ajisafe, A.K. *Laws and Customs of the Yoruba* (London George Routledge & Sons, 1924).

13 Durkheim, E. *Suicide: a study in sociology* (trans) J.A. Sapulding, & George Simpon (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 4 th impression, 1968) pp. 209-216.

14 Durkheim, E., *Suicide, op. cit.*, pp. 245-246.

15 Fagunwa, D.O. *Igbo Olodumare* (Thomas Nelson, (Nigeria) Ltd., 1975) p. 36.

16 A.F.B. Bridges, Intelligence Report on Ondo District, Ondo Division, Ondo Province, 1934-File CSO 26/4/30172, National Archives, Ibadan, p. 59; Fadipo, N.A. *The Sociology of Yoruba, op. cit.*, p. 90.

17 Clarke, W.H. *Travels and exploration in Yorubaland, op. cit.*, pp. 236-237.

18 Lucas Archdeacon J.O. *The religion of the Yorubas* (Lagos, C.M.S. Bookshop, 1948) pp. 31-174.

19 Odudoye, M. *The vocabulary of Yoruba religious discourse* (Ibadan, Daystar Press, 1971) p. 113.

20 Talbot, P.A. *Tribes of the Niger Delta: their religions and customs* (London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. New impression 1967) p. 258.

the immediate place, like the gods, between the living and the supreme God. But only those among the ancestors who had lived well, in accordance with conventional injunctions and who were buried with due ceremonies could go to deathland and join the pantheon of ancestors.

The Yoruba classified death into natural and unnatural. Those who died natural death especially of old age received fitting and due funeral ceremonies. Their passing was followed by what Ellis described as a 'usual outburst of exaggerated grief, with loud cries, lamentations and frenzied gestures.'²¹ Ellis was partly right in his observation but Clarke's remarks represent a clearer picture of what followed the announcement of the death considered natural. Kinsmen and relatives turned his death to 'an occasion of rejoicing equalled perhaps to foreign nations when the king dies'²² The body is washed usually with a decoction of aromatic herbs to ensure cleanliness of the corpse and admission of the soul of the dead into ghost-land. It was also believed to ensure re-incarnation in pure body. The body is dressed up in the best clothes of the deceased, and then covered with numerous cloths of the deceased and others supplied by his kinsmen. The corpse is then laid in state for a few days ranging from two to five depending on the status of the deceased. This is done to enable kinsmen however widely dispersed to assemble and pay their last respect before burial. Before internment, the body is placed on a board, covered with cloths and borne at a trot through the streets.²³ The men carrying the corpse (the Yoruba did not use coffins) are followed by kinsmen singing the praise names, *oriki*, of the deceased and those of his lineage.

Actual internment took place towards evening after the procession had returned. It was customary to bury the dead in deep graves in the outeryard or along the portico (verandah). This inter-mural burial, the Yoruba believed, consecrated the house by the presence of its ancestors and enabled kinsmen to know where to pray to their ancestors.²⁴ Thus, it was necessary for a Yoruba to be able to ascertain the grave of his forebears and kinsmen. Internment was accompanied by offerings, sacrifices and lamentations. As the corpse was being lowered, messages were sent through the deceased to long-deceased kinsmen and the ghost

of the one being buried was implored to behave itself in ghostland.²⁵ Many articles of value, some of them possessed and fond of by the deceased and many others meant for his use in death-land were entombed. For instance, if he was a hunter or warrior, some of his weapons were entombed and if a chief, some slaves were sacrificed at his graveside. Eating and feasting commenced and continued all day and night. Some funeral rites were usually performed on the third, seventh and fortieth days after internment. These were done to enable the deceased to return speedily and be born again into the family. Thus, male children born into Yoruba families after the death of fathers and grandfathers were called Babatunde the deceased father had returned to his own people; while daughters born after the death of mothers and grandmothers were called Yejide or Yetunde²⁶ – the deceased mother had risen or the deceased mother had returned to the household.

But full burial ceremonies were denied to all those who died unnatural death.²⁷ These included death resulting from sasswood decoction administered to witchcraft suspects, death resulting from infectious diseases such as small pox, death resulting from lightning and drowning, women who died during pregnancy or at childbirth. Other people who were thus regarded were hunchbacks, twins and suicides. The corpses of infants, youths and victims of sasswood (or other ordeals) were buried in shallow graves behind the household, or were simply thrown away in the bush.²⁸ Corpses of those killed by infectious diseases were buried in the groves. Dead pregnant women were opened up, the foetuses were removed and buried in inveted earthen-wares while the women were left propped up against trees in the groves.²⁹ The corpse of the drowning was buried at the bank of the river, in most cases at the point of retrieval; corpses of victims of lightning were tied to special trees in the groves. Hunchbacks were cut up, the bump removed and both bump and corpse buried in separate inverted earthenwares. Twin children (except in Oyo) were regarded as an abomination, while the mothers went through

21 Ellis, Lt. Col. A.B. *The Yoruba-speaking peoples of the slave coast of West Africa; their laws, language etc.* 2nd Impression (London, Curzone Press, 1974) p. 155.

22 Clarke, W.H. *Travels and explorations in Yorubaland*, op. cit., pp. 249-251.

23 Ellis, Lt-Col. A.B. *The Yoruba-speaking people*, op. cit. p. 158. & Clarke, W.H. *Travels and explorations in Yorubaland*, op. cit. p. 250.

24 Governor MacGregor's Letter to Joseph Chamberlain Secretary of State for the Colonies, 24th November, 1899 in Colonial office papers 147/145, vol. V, deposited at the Public Records Office, London.

25 Lucas, Archdeacon J.O. *The religion of the Yorubas* op. cit. pp. 225-227 & Oduyoye, M. *The vocabulary of Yoruba religious discourse*, op. cit., p. 113.

26 Johnson, S., *The history of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 81 Babajamu, M. *Yoruba Literature* (Ilorin, Nigerian Publications Service, 4th Edition, 1966) p. 82 & Adeoye, C.L. *Oruko Yoruba*, Atunse Keji (Ibadan, O.U.P. 1973) p. 13.

27 Fadipe, N.A. *The sociology of Yoruba*, op. cit., p. 164.

28 T.E. Rice, O/C Akure to AG Colonial Secretary Lagos, 18th Sept. 1899, in Colonial Office Records, 147/145 vol. v. October-December, 1899.

29 Babajamu, M. *Yoruba literature*, op. cit. p. 115 A.F. Abel Intelligence Report on Otun District, Ekiti Division, Ondo Province, 1937. File No. Ekiti Division 1/2 444, National Archives, Ibadan, p. 2 of meeting held on 28th Feb., 1929.

purification rituals, the twins were killed and buried in the groves.³⁰ These special burials were done, the Yoruba believed, to prevent the rebirth of these persons and the re-occurrence of the abnormalities. As they were thus denied due burial ceremonies, people believed that they would not go to deathland, rather, their ghosts wandered about desolate,³¹ haunting the bush and homeland of the kinsmen and finally to reincarnate in animals such as the baboon or plants such as *ofun* trees.

The suicide passed generally as unnatural death. But there were categories of suicide: those resulting from guilt feelings, others motivated by utter despair and the third classified as conventional. Suicides of the first and second categories were regarded as anti-social crimes while the third which had the features of Durkheim's obligatory altruistic suicide³² was highly regarded. The first two categories of suicides were denied due funeral rites, their bodies were left for professional undertakers.³³ Their corpses were often left unburied in the groves and were thus called *oku igbe* – corpses thrown into the bush. Relatives held no feasts for them, and no mourning was observed. Their names were not invoked in sacrifices involving the ancestors. The conventional suicide on the other hand was regarded as performing some sacred duty, Alvarez's 'hedonistic ideal'³⁴ in obedience to some indigenous code. They usually consisted of personal servants and wives of obas and chiefs, some chiefs and the obas. Many of them committed suicide or allowed their own slaughter, common citizens and lesser chiefs among them are believed to reincarnate as superior persons.

Suicide terminologies:

The Yoruba word for death is *iku*. When a common citizen dies, he is said to have been taken or snatched away by death, it is thus rendered *iku*

ti mu u lo, or it simply that he has gone to deathland, *o ti lo si orun alakeji*. However, when a chief or a warrior died, he was said to have slept, *o sun*, or simply that he had obtained his kinsmen's clothes, *o ti teri gb'aso ebi*. When an oba died he was said to have entered the cellar of beads, *oba wo aja okun/akun* or the death was proclaimed to the subjects in euphemisms such as 'there has been a change of house,' *ile pada*, 'the pillar has fallen,' *opo ye* or 'the stake is broken,' *opa se*.³⁵ The house here referred to was the ruling house which had produced the deceased oba for, in each kingdom of the Yoruba, many ruling houses alternately provided (and still rotate) candidates for the throne. The pillar here referred to represented the decorated posts adorning the verandah of the palace while the stake here referred to represented the beaded batons which served the oba as his staff of office.

Suicide is called, *ipara eni*, killing one's self and the suicide is said to have killed himself, *o pa ara re*. Suicide terminologies are numerous and are all coined to correspond with the mode of suicide. The means of suicide among the Yoruba included hanging, inflicting razor or dagger cuts and poisoning. Suicide by hanging is said to have *p'okun so*. The first person to discover the suicide in that state stripped himself naked on the spot and thus ran breaking the news as he went. Suicides made razor or knife cuts round their left wrists, *ge orun owo osi*, cut their own throats, *gba 'fun* or *gba 'run*, or disembowelled themselves, *gba 'kun*. Inflicting cuts in the manners described above had nothing to do with the christian notion of 'sin offering'³⁶ as Adeyemo suggested in a paper delivered recently in a seminar, for these modes of suicide were prevalent among the Yoruba and among other African and non-African peoples, notably the Japanese,³⁷ long before their contact with christianity. Suicides who 'walked away' as the Yoruba say 'like the millipede' – *rin lo bi okun* often

30 Reeve Tuckers report on the North-eastern District, Lagos Protectorate in Annual Report for the year 1900-1901. deposited at the National Archives, Ibadan. pp. 13 & 15.

31 Fadipe, N.A. *The Sociology of Yoruba*, op. cit., p. 164.

32 Durkheim, E., *Suicide*, op. cit., pp. 217-221.

33 Lucas, Archdeacon J.O. *The religion of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 234.

34 Alvarez, A. *The Savage god: a study of suicide* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 4th Impression 1972) p. 250.

35 Olubobokun Chief J.O. *Itan Uyin* (Yaba, Forward Press, 1950) p. 12 & Babajamu, M. *Yoruba Literature*, op. cit. p. 70.

36 J.O. Adeyemo, 'The possession phenomenon in ritual suicide: African psychotherapeutic resources for prevention, intervention and post vention', 'Seminar of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ife, Nigeria, November 30, 1978 p. 10.

37 Millot, B. *The life and death of the Kamikazes: Divine Thunder* (trans) Lowell Bair, Mayfair Books Ltd. 1974, pp. 10, 13-14.

escaped to some distant places and got lost either by jumping over some precipice or perishing in some other way. Those who committed suicide by swallowing poisonous substances were said to have 'eaten' poison, *gbe oogun je*, or *gbe iwo mi*³⁸ and where the poison consisted of powdered stuff, the suicide was said to have 'eaten' powder, *yan etu je* or *yan abe je*. These were terms used where the suicides were common citizens, including chiefs but, where the suicide was an oba, he was said to have 'opened the sacred calabash,' *o si igba wo*.³⁹ Dane guns were introduced into Yorubaland, especially the hinterland states during the second decade of the nineteenth century and snider rifles began to appear in the 1870's.⁴⁰ Suicides who blasted their heads out were said to have 'eaten gun bullets', *yin 'bon je* for such suicides usually put the barrels of the guns in their mouths before they pulled the trigger with their toes. Suicides of the conventional codes especially chiefs usually took poison, most of them in their own homes and among their kinsmen, thus they were said to have 'gone home and slept' – *wo ile lo sun*. Those among them who were servants and wives were said to have 'gone away with their masters' – *ba oluwa re lo*.

Personal suicide

The first category of personal suicide among the Yoruba as far as this exercise is concerned has the features of what Bohannan called 'institutionalized suicide' explained by him as 'suicide in which the offended person kills himself before the front door of his offender.'⁴¹ Classifying suicide of this description as 'institutionalized' seems to have only partly dealt with the issues involved and thus Jeffrey's classification

38 Babajamu, M., *Yoruba Literature*, op. cit. p. 71.

39 Ogunbowale, P.O. *Asa ibile Yoruba* (Ibadan, O.U.P. Reprinted, 1973) p. 32.

40 Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas*, op. cit. pp. 459-460; Akintoye, S.A. *Revolution and Power politics in Yorubaland, 1840-1893* (London Longman Group Ltd. 1971) pp. 118-120.

41 Bohannan, P. *African homicide and suicide* (Princeton, University Press, 1960) Introduction p. xv.

of it as 'samsonic'⁴² appears more applicable as far as the Yoruba suicide of this kind is concerned. The suicide was usually a common citizen and the causes of suicide were many. A powerful member of the community might rob him, misuse and intimidate him. Two options were opened before him: accept the situation or die. Often blackmail led to suicide. A citizen who felt aggrieved by false accusation of theft, or witchcraft usually professed his innocence and 'defend his honour and that of his kinsmen' by electing to die. This form of suicide represented the most serious form of protest among the Yoruba and it was described as 'dying on the neck of the aggressor' – *ku si ebita lorun*. The aggrieved and protestor usually committed suicide in the presence of the aggressor or accuser and they were often watched by members of the community. Aggrieved wives, children and slaves usually died by forcibly and repeatedly throwing themselves down or knocking their heads against some hard object such as wall, hard floor and laterite. This is called, *f'ori so 'le*.⁴³ Those accused of witchcraft usually swallowed potion made of sasswood and other ingredients. An aggrieved commoner went alone or was followed by his kinsmen who normally shared in the grief and, at the door or in the presence of the aggressor disembowelled himself, or cut his own throat.

This form of suicide had the connotations of revenge among the Yoruba. The people believed that the aggressor or accuser bore the guilt of the suicide whose death he had caused. It is believed that the aggressor would account and pay fully for his wantonness before the ancestors. In addition, he bore the cost of funeral obsequies or whatever the undertakers claimed. This was usually heavy and consisted of fees (cowrie currency) and kolanuts, palm oil and fowls.⁴⁴ Therefore, a mere threat of suicide by an aggrieved person who persisted in professing his innocence was enough to cause the accuser to withdraw his charges unless the latter was sure of his grounds and/or was bent on having his way.

Yoruba folk literature is replete with many instances of persons who expressed disgust for the reacted against personal injuries and infringement on their dignity by committing suicide. Their suicides contained elements of revenge and were therefore samsonic. But one has

42 M.D.W. Joffreys, 'samsonic suicide or suicide of revenge among Africans' *African Studies* Vol. xi, No. 3, 1952, pp. 118-122.

43 Evidence collected from Oba Olatubosun the Ologotun (King) of Ogotun Ekiti, 19th April, 1975, Corroborated by others such as chief James Ologunagba, the regent of Oka Akoko, 30th April, 1975, and I.A. Fayenuwo of 41 Gbelenkan street, Ile-Ife, on 24th May, 1975.

44 Lucas, Archdeacon, J.O. *The religion of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 234.

to be conversant with Yoruba culture and its allusive language to discover the cause and mode of suicide. Often, the cause of suicide was represented as more light-hearted jokes and often suicide was suphemistically expressed as 'entering alive into the bowels of the earth' - *wó 'le leave*, or transforming oneself into a rock or stream' - *s'ara dota* or *s'ara d'omi*. A few instances will illustrate the phenomenon.

In an undated past in Ile-Ife, reputed as the holy city of the Yoruba, there lived a brave hunter named Omowonmi. The source of Omowonmi's power lay in a powerful charm and to preserve its efficacy, he observed a ritual which carried an injunction that no object might be delivered to him with the left hand. Omowonmi's wife was privy to this ritual but one day at the gathering of hunters, she used her left hand to serve a cup of wine to her husband. Omowonmi took the wine, yelled out in disgust, grabbed his wife and together they disappeared into the earth.⁴⁵ The main theme of this story was that Omowonmi reacted violently to his wife's betrayal, murdered her and committed suicide himself.

Another tradition has it that Ogun, worshipped among the Yoruba as the god of iron and patron god of hunters, warriors and blacksmiths is said to have discovered that his wife named Efunseke committed adultery with one of his close associates, named Gbaiyegun. Efunseke fled to Saki and there committed suicide before Gbaiyegun. Ogun the husband also committed suicide.⁴⁶ The cause of both suicides was the wickedness of Gbaiyegun.

Owo traditions claim that the suicide of Oronsen, one-time wife of their oba named Renrengjen, who reigned about the fifteenth century, was the origin of their Igogo festival. Owo is a town in present-day Ondo State and the Olowo (kind) of Owo is ranked among the principal obas of Yorubaland. Renrengjen is described as the third oba of the town. His wife Oronsen observed a ritual for which she observed some prohibitions: okro could not be beaten and bundles of firewood could not be dropped in her presence. But the other wives of the oba envied Oronsen's position, and they betrayed her by performing the forbidden acts before her. In bewilderment and despair, she 'disappeared into the unknown.'⁴⁷ The husband disguised himself in women apparel, a simple tunic, with hair plaited in Ornsen's style and searched the whole neighbourhood. Oronsen

was gone for even and the Igogo festival was thenceforward observed in her commemoration.

The three instances cited here appear legendary but at least the last-mentioned seems to have represented an actual event, for, Oronsen's name is still invoked at the annual Igogo festival in Owo. The Oba still appears in public in women's tunic and hair plaits. These instances are not isolated ones and many aggrieved individuals have committed suicide in similar circumstances, but information about them are not forthcoming.

A secondary category of personal suicide among the Yoruba was usually motivated by the desire to avoid pain and disgrace. Events leading to such suicide seem similar to conditions which Alvarez has considered as capable of causing 'the psychic mechanisms of self-preservation (to) go into the reverse.' For instance where a person was afflicted with an incurable disease and all efforts by his kinsmen to get him cured had proved abortive, the afflicted might bemoan his fate and, as he was no longer able or allowed to take part in most communal activities, he more often withdrew into himself and might finally take his own life. Thus people resorted to this category of suicide to release themselves from sufferings, further affliction and the shame of defeat. The folk literatures of the Yoruba contain stories of suicides motivated by anguish.

One of such stories, relate how an orphan, whose only food was the praying mantis was once robbed of his special diet by some of his mates. He was so depressed when he discovered what had happened and remained so inconsolable that he called on the gods to send down the chains. The gods did accede to his request and he 'ascended to heaven' chanting as he went:

45 Yemitan, O. *Ijala are ode* (Ibadan, O.U.P., Reprinted 1972) p. 1.

46 Bada, Chief S.O. Ojo, *Iwe Itan Saki* (Oyo, Atoro Printing Works, 1937) p. 14.

47 O. Ogunba, 'Ceremonies' in Blobaku, S.O. (ed) *sources of Yoruba history* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973) p. 101. & Akeredolu, 'Igogo festival' *Nigeria magazine*, No. 77, June, 1963, pp. 90-104.

48 Alvarez, A. *The Savage god*, op. cit. p. 50.

Solo: Ogun jegele ode
 Chorus: Jegeleje
 Solo: Ogun jegele ode
 Chorus: Jegeleje
 Solo: Olusu m'usu sun
 Eleura m'eura sun
 Mo m'alaunrinun sun
 An ye 'launrinun je
 Orisa ta 'kun mo mo lo
 Oni l'un ir'orun
 Chorus: Jegeleje.⁴⁹
 (Trans) Solo: Merciful Ogun, master of the open air
 Chorus: Friend of the tender
 Solo: Merciful Ogun, master of the open air
 Chorus: Friend of the tender
 Solo: Mates roast their yams
 Some roast their wateryams
 I place my mantis on fire
 They ate my mantis
 Cast down the chains, you gods
 And today I return to you.

The story cited is only one of the versions often recited in Ado-Ekiti. Several versions of it exist in other Ekiti and indeed among the various Yoruba communities. The plot of each of them revolved round a depressed orphan who committed suicide to end his troubles.⁵⁰ In the Yoruba belief, heaven was regarded as the zone lying above the clouds, this zone was believed to have been in some distant past, very close to the earth. As that time, anyone in anguish called on the ancestors and the gods, in *orun alakeji* to throw down the ropes or chains and the afflicted thus ascended into heaven.

In some cases, people in anguish of any form, and suffering from irremediable situation are merely said to have 'walked away' through some mysterious passage called 'the road to heaven,' *ona orun*.⁵¹ What these

49 Evidence and folklore collected from David Fabusola, 28 Ereguru Street, Ado-Ekiti, 30th May, 1975. Other versions collected for example from Chief S. Adetifa, the Akapinsa of Ikere (Ekiti) of 88 Amoye street, Ikere-Ekiti 20th April, 1975.

50 In some cases, the story are woven around animals. One has it around the antelope (etu) which preserved its mother in heaven while other animals killed theirs. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti has used this particular story for one of his songs 'gbogbo aiye pa yeye re je - Arinjanjankijan.'

51 Evidence collected from David Fabusola, Ado-Ekiti and I.A. Fayenuwo, Ile-Ife.

passages were cannot be described definitely. They were probably very deep pits, or were some shrines where the unfortunate people were killed or sold into slavery. Such passages are said to exist in many places in Yorubaland and the most popular is reported in Ile-Ife, close to where the museum now stands. The location of some of the presumed 'passages' were pointed out to the present author in 1975 during field work but informants claimed that these 'passages' were sealed up on the orders of the authorities when the mode of suicide became rather persistent.

Legends are built around local heroes and heroines who, when in trouble, transformed themselves into streams and rocks, another allusive reference to anomic suicide among the Yoruba. The natural objects into which these legendary figures presumably transformed themselves most probably pre-existed the episodes. One can tolerably say that the legendary figures were associated with these objects for some inexplicable reasons and circumstances.

Oya, the first example in this exercise, is described as the principal wife of Sango, the Alafin of Oyo whose reign is often dated to the sixteenth century. Oya was a native of Ira, a village situated near the banks of the river Niger. As the leading wife of Alafin, Oya enjoyed considerable abundance and when she heard news of her royal husband's suicide and considered the shame associated with the act, 'she disappeared into the bowels of the earth at Ira.'⁵² Rather than regard her as the anomic suicide she was, Oya was regarded as a 'honourable' suicide and was subsequently deified. Oya was thence worshipped as goddess of the river Niger and the Yoruba have since called the river Niger, *Odo Oya*, Oya's river.

Omidiji, the second example, fits more succinctly into type. She is described as a one-breasted woman who remained for a long time as a spinster on account of this abnormality but eventually became a wife to Ogundele described as a fore-most Egba blacksmith in the old Egba homeland (present-day central Oyo State). Ogundele and Omidiji swore to keep each other's secrets: Ogundele would not openly refer to Omidiji's physical abnormality, Omidiji would not intrude into Ogundele's shrine. The couple had a son called Odegbemi, a sickler. But Ogundele had a powerful potion which he used on Odegbemi whenever he was ill and he kept the medicine in the innermost recesses of the shrine. One day, while the father was away from home, Odegbemi collapsed and fainted. All efforts by the neighbours to revive him failed and after persistent requests

52 Fadipe, N.A. *The sociology of Yoruba*, op. cit., pp. 263-264. Fagunwa D.O. at I.L.J. Lewis, *Taiwo ati Kehinde, Iwe Kerin* (London, O.U.P. Deprinted, 1954) p. 23.

and when it dawned on everyone present that Odegbemi might die, Omidiji fetched the concoction/potion from the shrine. Odegbemi had hardly been revived when, as if by design Ogundele returned. As soon as he discovered that his wife had defiled his shrine, he lost his temper and broke his vow to his wife, publicly calling her, a one-breasted hag! The neighbours were shocked and the woman was in apparent distress. In anguish, she went into the shrine, fetched the potion and fled. Ogundele and the neighbours gave chase throwing all manner of missiles at fleeing Omidiji and screaming their heads out. They never caught up with Omidiji alive, for, when finally they saw her, she was dead, still clutching the pot containing the decoction. But they could not retrieve the pot, for, water was already gushing out of it. Before their eyes, the water became a pool, then a river which they called Oogun (medicine).⁵³ Its source, tradition claims, lies in the old Egba homeland, it flows through old and new Egbaland. This is the history of the Ogun river in Abeokuta.

The third example is Ogbese, now a river and a god of Ikoyi communities in Ikole and Igbemo and Ago communities in Ado-(Ekiti). Ogbese is described a citizen of old Ikoyi (since 1920's a quarter in Ikole-Ekiti) and is usually described as the leading warrior of his time. He is said to have led his men into an unnamed battle, lost the day and fled before his enemies. Hotly pursued and realising the fate that awaited him if captured alive – a public exhibition before execution, – Ogbese reportedly 'transformed himself into a stream' which has since borne his name.⁵⁴ Of course, the river Ogbese takes its source in old Ikoyi forests and flows through Igbemo and Ago in old Ado kingdom before it joins the river Ose as a tributary.

The fourth example is sinsingunrinsin described as a citizen of old Ilesun, a pre-Oduduwa community around present-day Ado-Ekiti. Sinsingunrinsin is described as a herbal healer. It is said that the Olukere (ruler of Ikere, then a village some fifteen kilometres south of Ilesun) invited the healer to cure him (Olukere) of his leprosy. Sinsingunrinsin was successful in this task but incurred the displeasure of the local medicinemen who had not been able to cure their chief's affliction. These men plotted and invaded Sinsingunrinsin's hermitage, a cave behind Olukere's courtyard. But the powerful medicineman is said to have

transformed himself into the huge rock Olosunta, which has since been the most prominent physical feature in the town. He was nicknamed *Amoye*, one with great intelligence and one who outwitted his enemies.⁵⁵ The people had since deified him and the rock has since remained an object of annual worship.

While the four examples might appear legendary because the episodes are not dated, and because the physical features associated with them pre-existed the episodes, the fact remains that these instances seem to represent a feature of Yoruba culture, the root cause and processes of deification. Since Sango is known as a historic Alafin, and Oya is usually named as one of his wives it is reasonable to suppose that the woman actually lived at least as a contemporary of Sango. Except in the case of Omidiji whose actual homeland was not known and whose deification seems rather imperfect, the rituals observed for Oya, Ogbese and Olosunta seem to have had their origins in some distant historical events.

But instances of suicide similarly motivated by the desire to escape from some insufferable situations and which can be substantiated with evidence will suffice to illustrate the point. Four instances will also be cited; the first episode concerning Owari probably happened during the sixteenth century, the second involving chief Lijofi and over a thousand of his followers happened about 1854; the third concerning Faloo happened about 1879 and the last example women around Efunsetan Aniwura took place early in the 1880's.

Owari is generally mentioned in Ijesa traditions as a sixteenth century oba, indeed the last oba of the old capital at Ipole. His kingdom was involved in war with Old Oyo and the commander of Ijesa forces, named Ajagbute was mortally wounded in battle. Fearing that the worst might happen to his throne and his kingdom if the commander of his forces died, Owari is said to have 'gone underground alive' – *o wole l'aaye*.⁵⁶ A few moments after the oba's suicide, Ajagbute recovered from his wounds and discovering what had happened, he too committed suicide on the spot. Of course, Owari's suicide overshadowed that of his war chief and for this paper, it is Owari's suicide that fits into one motivated by defeat and desire to escape from shame and insufferable situations.

The only instance so far obtained of large-scale suicide in Yoruba history took place in Aramoko (Ekiti) in 1854. Events which culminated in

53 Evidence collected from Alhaj Sowami oko Quarters, Abeokuta, 19th March, 1975 & Chief Titus Olaosebikan Amusan, the Baasala of Ibara, Abeokuta 19th March, 1975.

54 Evidence collected from David Fabusola, Ado-Ekiti, & papa John Adelusi, of Ago village (near Ado-Ekiti, a village on the banks of the river Ogbese) 4th June, 1975.

55 A. Ajayi, 'Olosunta festival,' *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 84 March 1965, pp. 17, 19 and 30.

56 Oni, J.O. *A short history of Ijeshaland (Ile-Ife, Fadehan Printing Works 1972) p. 27* Ekundare, M.O. *Iwe itan adugbo kokan to wa ninu ilu Ilesha, op. cit. p. 1.*

this most horrifying episode began in 1850 when the people of Aramoko accused their oba of slave dealing and fearing the consequences, the oba got Ibikunle the Ibadan leader, then in camp at Igbajo to intercede on his behalf with his subjects. Ibikunle complied with the Alara's (king of Aramoko) requests and the people 'forgave' their oba. But in 1852, the oba again fell out of favour with his subjects and they set about the machinery to get him out of the throne in the traditional way. Ibikunle once again intervened but this time the Aramoko chiefs and people rejected his services. Ibikunle was infuriated by this rejection and he made war on Aramoko. Ibadan was, in the 1850's fast becoming the greatest military power in Yorubaland but Aramoko put up a stout defence and fought Ibadan for upwards of two years. In the end, after suffering great losses and when defeat was in sight and, fearing what treatment Ibadan would mete out to Aramoko especially the fighting forces, the war chief Lejofi led the way by committing suicide. It is said that over 1,600 Aramoko stalwarts joined their chief in the heroic act.⁵⁷

The third example, Faloo, was one of the most famous of Ado (Ekiti) warriors in the 1870's; indeed he was reputedly the most famous swordsman of his time in that part of Yorubaland. Ado traditions refer to him as most probably responsible for the capture by Ado forces of Idoani in 1879. But later in the year, he obtained a supply of dane guns which he began to practise with. One of the guns accidentally blew up in his face, cutting off one of his fingers. Fearing the jokes associated with those who were thus disfigured, Faloo committed suicide as a face-saving measure.⁵⁸

The most celebrated suicide of this category as far as this paper is concerned, is that of Efunsetan Aniwura. This woman came into prominence during the 1860's as the best known of Ibadan women leaders. She became the titled leader (Iyalode) of Ibadan women and wielded considerable powers. She was very wealthy; she possessed a large house and court teeming with hundreds of slaves. These were attributes of members of the military aristocracy in Ibadan since the 1840's. Eventually the Iyalode became notorious on account of her cruelty to her slaves and her cass disregard for the authorities, most especially Momo (Mohammed) Latosisa, the military ruler of Ibadan. In the end, Ibadan leaders arrested the Iyalode and reduced her to the status of a slave at the court of Latosisa.⁵⁹ She bemoaned her fate and wished, in words immortalized by Isola:

'Bi aye ko ba se e gbe

Orun yio se e lo

Alasiri ni iku⁶⁰

(Trans) If it becomes unbearable to live

One can die with dignity

Death is a guarantor of that

Finally, Efunsetan Aniwura poisoned herself.

The third category of personal suicide among the Yoruba is that caused by guilt feelings. Again folk traditions contain a few instances for our discussion. But it is necessary to distinguish between suicides stemming from guilt feelings and those motivated by despair and anguish. The most notable difference between these two categories of suicide is that suicides motivated by despair were tolerably regarded while those emanating from guilt feelings were regarded with utter disdain. Therefore the worst of treatment was meted to the suicides of the latter category. Not only were they denied decent burial their names were defamed in addition. Two instances cited for this discussion were obas: Sango of Oyo and Okinbaloye of Ado (Ekiti).

Sango, regarded as the fourth oba of Old Oyo is said to have lived in the sixteenth century. Johnson described him as a man of 'very wild disposition and fiery temper, skilful in sleight of hand tricks' and also as 'a tyrant.' In a reign of seven years marked by wars and large-scale execution of his subjects, Sango further provoked his subjects to fury when he set the palace on fire. He lost his head when many of his wives and children perished in the fire. To make matters worse, his chiefs remonstrated with him on account of his misrule. Sango fled the city. He was followed by a large retinue of partisans but when these subsequently deserted him, he hanged himself by the roadside.⁶²

Okinbaloye, is described in Ado traditions as the twelfth Ewi (king) of Ado (Ekiti) kingdom. He is said to have lived in the seventeenth century. His mother was a daughter of an unnamed Olojudo (king) of Ido (Ekiti) a kingdom some twenty kilometres, away to the north of Ado. When Okinbaloye became oba of Ado, he is said to have demonstrated dual loyalties and indeed to have been so sympathetically disposed to Ido that he caused a few Ado communities to be transferred to his mother's natal

57 Johnson, S., *The history of the Yorubas op. cit.*, p. 321.

58 Oguntuyi, Father A. *Aduloju Dodondawa* (Ibadan, Ogun Press, n.d.) p. 19.

59 Isola, A. *Efunsetan Aniwura: Iyalode Ibadan* (Ibadan, O.U.P. 1970) pp. 73-75; Johnson S. *The history of the Yorubas, op. cit.*, p. 391.

60 Isola, A. *Efunsetan Aniwura, op. cit.*, p. 77.

61 Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas, op. cit.* pp. 149-151; Fagunwa, D.O. at L.J. Lewis, *Taiwo ati Kehinde, Iwe kerin, op. cit.*, p. 19.

62 Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas, op. cit.* p. 151, & Fagunwa, D.O. at L.J. Lewis, *Taiwo ati Kehinde, Iwe kerin, op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

kingdom. Okinbaloye's actions were so distasteful to Ado people that the chiefs, as spokesmen of the citizens, challenged him. The oba is said to have had advanced knowledge of some conspiratory action against him and one day while the citizens demonstrated wildly about the palace, Okinbaloye destroyed the vault containing the royal beads before he 'transformed himself into an elephant' and 'disappeared in the surrounding forests.'⁶³

The suicides of these two obas were motivated by despondency resulting from misdeeds done to whole communities. Commoners who defiled shrines or broke powerful conventional sanctions (taboos) fall into the same category. But whatever the status of this category of suicide, the corpses were usually removed from the place of death and 'dealt with' by people entirely unrelated to the deceased, this group of specialists existed in every community as professional undertakers, they charged fees and in some cases, confiscated for their own use all the moveable properties of the deceased.

In addition the suicides' corpses were maltreated in some special way. Sango and Okinbaloye probably suffered in this way. But the traditions are silent on this issue. In the first place, the person and office of obas were regarded as sacred among the Yoruba,⁶⁴ and nothing derogatory to their person and office could be directly mentioned. Moreover, in the case of Sango, his friends devised a clever trick by which they attracted lightning and insisted that the attendant mishaps were caused by Sango who was avenging the disgrace done to him.⁶⁵ In this way, these people succeeded in deifying Sango and in representing lightning as Sango's weapon of offence and defence. Ado traditions maintain that Okinbaloye escaped into the bush in the form of an elephant. But it is clear from what happened thereafter that his body was subjected to vile indignities. His name and memory have since the episode been defamed, he was nicknamed Arutawekun – literally one who used stones to destroy beads, but actually one who defiled royalty, and the ruling house he represented on the throne was surreptitiously nullified as a ruling house.

63 Oguntuyi, Father A., *A short history of Ado-Ekiti Part II* (Akure, Aduralere Printing Works, 1952) p. 32.

64 Smith, R.S. *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (London, Methuen, 1972) p. 107. See also O.W. Macrow, 'Natural ruler, a Yoruba, conception of monarch' *Nigeria magazine*, No. 47; 1955 & P.C. Lloyd, 'Sacred kingship among the Yoruba' *Africa*, vol. xxx, July, 1960.

65 Johnson, S., *The history of the Yoruba*, op. cit., p. 152, Fagunwa, D.O. & L.J. Lewis, *Taiwo ati Kehinde, Iwe Kerin*, op. cit., pp. 25-28; Ellis t.-Col. A.B. *The Yoruba - speaking peoples* op. cit., pp. 50-52.

Conventional suicide

Conventional suicide among the Yoruba has many features of Durkheim's 'obligatory altruistic suicide'⁶⁶ which Bohannan has defined as one in which the suicide 'is bound to an institution part of which doctrine or activity extol suicide as a means of the end value of the institution.'⁶⁷ Suicides of this definition among the Yoruba consist of three main kinds: those who allowed or concurred to their own slaughter or immolation as sacrificial victims, those who sought 'the favour' as a mark of their loyalty to a master and those whose office demanded of them to die.

Among the Yoruba, the sacrificial (piacular) victim was called *oluwo*.⁶⁸ In some communities the victim were war captives and slaves but in many cases freeborn citizens of near and far distant places were made *oluwo*. Yet, in some other cases the victims were citizens of the community, oftentimes chiefs and men of rank even in court circles. Occasions necessitating human sacrifice were numerous: crises in the communities, warnings of the priests of impending catastrophe, the incessant demands of human sacrifice by the gods such as Oramfe in Ile-Ife and Ondo,⁶⁹ Obalufon in Ado (Ekiti)⁷⁰ Olofin in Idanre, Anlugbua in Old Owu⁷¹ etc. which were made known by the adherents, desire by the communities to appease that patron gods for peace and plenty, important funeral and installation ceremonies, and important annual palace or community rituals. For instance a powerful ritual in Akure received annual human sacrifice and Omolaare and Asogbon, two titled officials of the palace of the Deji (king) to Akure were the victims. For this reason, respective incumbents assumed the title for only a year, the titles were conferred annually on people who knew and accepted the institution and the ultimate slaughter. Indeed, the two chiefs were also called 'agbo l'ijo ogun'⁷² the sacrificial animal for ogun festival.

66 Durkheim, E., *Suicide* op. cit., pp. 217-221, & 227.

67 Bohannan, P. *African homicide and suicide*, op. cit., p. 10.

68 Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 11. Odunjo, J.F. *Iwe Karun atunse kini, Alawiye* (Longmans, Nigerians, Nigeria, 1976).

69 Letters of the Rev. Charles Phillips to Governor Moloney Lagos, 12th August 1887, 19th Sept., 1887 and authorities of Ode (town of) Ondo to Governor Moloney 27th Sept. 1887, in Colonial Office Record, 147/61 vol. IV.

70 Oguntuyi Father A. *A short history of Ado-Ekiti part II*, op. cit., p. 67 & Lucas, Archoedacon J.O. *The religion of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 217.

71 Mabogunje, A. & J.O. Omer-Cooper, *Ow in Yoruba history* (Ibadan University Press, 1971) p. 106.

72 Evidence given by Chief Kola Cluwatuyi (the Lisa of Akure and chairman of Akure kingmakers) before the Ondo state chieftaincy Review Commission, Records of Daily Proceedings, No. 1, 6 June, 1977, p. 12.

The sacrificial victim was treated with respect and great indulgence for a period ranging between 7 and 9 days prior to the sacrifice. He was thus granted virtually all his wishes except his liberty and no evidence exists of victims who demanded this. On the day of his execution or suicide, the victim was dressed up in rags. The upper part of his body was left bare and his face was covered with red paints and white dots or stripes and vice versa. He was then, in that state, paraded through the streets and alleys. Citizens trooped out and, as he passed, many laid their hands on him thus transferring to him their guilts and sufferings. Others waited at their doors screaming out supplications. The victim was thus led to the shrine or grove, the former usually located within the town or village and the latter at the outskirts. While the crowd waited outside, the priests led the victim into the shrine or grove, he was ordered to make up and sing a song which the people waiting outside echoed. While the hubbub went on the victim committed suicide or was executed.⁷³

The sacrificial victim differed from the criminal, for very few crimes among the Yoruba carried the capital punishment. Heinous crimes included seducing the king's wife and violating the sacredness of the gods. Murder did not carry the capital punishment. Those criminals who were condemned to death were sacrificed also or were merely executed but they were usually gagged and only the community police and executioners 'escorted' the condemned criminal to the place of executions, chanting weird songs as they went. In Ado (Ekiti) the song was called '*ajambe*' - 'the cutting of the dog'⁷⁴ Thus, while it was the sacrificial victim who made up a parting song of his own choice, in the case of the criminal the execution squad sang special songs. The sacrificial victim was treated with indulgence, but the criminal was gagged and often physically assaulted; the sacrificial victim went joyfully to his death, the criminal had no choice before him, he was dying for his crimes. The mode of execution varied according to the nature of crime: he might be clubbed to death, nailed to a tree in the public square or decapitated, and his corpse was usually left on the place of execution to rot, and be pestered by predators. Although when killed or when they committed suicide, the corpses of particular victims might be left to rot in the grove or shrine yet, the places were protected from predators by priests.

73 Lucas, Archdeacon J.O. *The Religion of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 216-217, Talbot, P.A. *The peoples of Southern Nigeria a sketch of their history, ethnology and languages with an abstract ethnology and languages with an abstract on the 1921 census*, vol. III; *Ethnology* (London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd. New Impression, 1969) pp. 858-859.

74 Evidence collected from Salami Ajayi, the Oluwo (head of Ogboni fraternal association, Ado-Ekiti, 8th April, 1975.

Another category of conventional suicide among the Yoruba consisted of those who committed self murder to demonstrate their loyalty to some highly placed person in the community. Such officers of high rank included civil and military chiefs and obas, and the suicides usually consisted of wives, servants and slaves who had special relationships with their masters and chose to be inseparable from them in death. Of course this class of suicide died during the funeral obsequies of their husband and masters.

Wives among the suicides were those who were especially groomed for the purpose. They might be freeborn or slaves, the latter purchased and later turned into wives. Only men of high ranks in the community could afford this rarity. According to the Rev. Charles Phillips of the church missionary society who observed the custom in Ondo in the 1870's 'such young women are made to take on oath of fidelity to the masters (husbands). They are regarded and treated as the most favourable of their (husbands') wives and are always in attendance..... They are made to drink poisonous drugs which destroy in them the power of child bearing.'⁷⁵

Slaves who committed suicide to keep their masters company in post-death were those who had enjoyed abundance of life at the household of their masters. Among the Yoruba, slaves were regarded as members of the household of their masters who might be the actual captors or subsequent purchasers. Slaves were generally integrated into the households of their masters to the extent that they received names and facial or body marks of their masters' lineages.⁷⁶ Slaves enjoyed considerable freedom and those among them who had special talents either as craftsmen or medicine men had enhanced status in the household and in the community. Indeed, after three or four generations one could hardly distinguish between freeborns and descendants of slaves in any given Yoruba community.

In many cases, some slaves and servants became so intimately attached to their masters and enjoyed so much abundance that they sought and obtained 'this special favour' by which they desired to continue the mundane relationship in deathland. The Yoruba associated this kind of loyalty with the 'habit' of the pigeon. Pigeons, regarded as birds of good luck, abounded in large numbers in every household, their cootes often lay within the courtyard. They were most well treated among domestic fowls. As Yoruba houses were roofed with thatch, outbreak of fire was common

75 Phillips' Letters and Journals, File C.A2/078/91 Letter dated 20 Nov. 1978. Journals are deposited at the C.M.S. Archives, London.

76 Asabia, D.O. & J.O. Adegbesan, *Idoani Past and present*, op. cit., pp. 5 & 6.

and when this occurred, and while inmates and other domestic animals escaped to safety, the pigeons first flew out of danger only to return one by one to perish in the flames. Thus, the Yoruba commonly say, '*eiyele ki ba onile je, ba onile mu, ki o sa l'ojo iponju*' – the pigeon does not enjoy abundance of life and desert the household in time of crises.⁷⁷ This saying represented the choice often made by slaves and servants who committed suicide when their masters died. Oguntuyi told the story of a slave named Akerele, a captive from Idoani, who enjoyed abundance of life in the household of his master, chief Odogun Asegbeoloba of Ado (Ekiti) to the end that he commonly boasted before the people saying, '*ijo k'ada ba ti gbe s'oko l'eeke re igbe*' – the day the machete/cutlass is lost in the farm is the day its hilt is lost also.⁷⁸ Akerele was thus assuring all the sundry that he would die the day his master died! It was completely a matter of choice but it was partly excused in tradition. Thus, the servant or slave could not rescind his decision, otherwise, he carried the indelible mark of disgrace as a turncoat for the rest of his life and, indeed, was subject to elimination by the children of the master he had cheated.

The most commonly well known conventional suicides among the Yoruba consisted of office holders: Obas, Chiefs and other less important civil officers of each Yoruba state or kingdom who, after their installation lived lives of ordered ceremonials. For instance as the person and office of Yoruba obas were regarded as divine, no Yoruba oba could abdicate and continue to live as a private individual or continue to reign by sufferance, by the clemency of aggrieved subjects. Thus when an oba broke some conventional rules, making his rule no more acceptable to the people, 'he must die; and by his own hands.'⁷⁹ In Oyo, the Basorun (the traditional prime minister and head of the Oyo Mesi) delivered the rejection order to the Alafin. Among the Ijebu and Egba, the Osugbo and Ogboni chiefs respectively delivered the message of death to their oba. In the kingdom of Ife, Ijesa, kiti, Owo⁸⁰ and Ondo, the invitation to suicide for the oba was delivered by leaders of the local police; these were titled Bamgbosu in Owo and Ayadi in Ondo. The actual message 'advised' (a compulsory order) the oba to 'sleep.' He might be advised to open the sacred calabash said to contain ancestral relics but which actually contained poison. Oftentimes,

77 Evidence collected from obas Olatubosun, the Ologotun of Ogotun, 19th April, 1975; Chief Akintade the Manare of Idanre, 6th May, 1975 and Chief Babatunde, the Asara of Owo, 26th April, 1975.

78 Oguntuyi, Father A. *A short history of Ado-Ekiti part II*, op. cit., p. 58.

79 Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 173.

80 *Nigeria Population Census, 1963 List of events to determine ages* (compiled by) J.F. Ade Ajayi & A. Igun (Ibadan University Press, 1962) p. 467.

the oba was presented with parrot eggs and feathers.⁸¹ And as soon as the oba had been thus 'advised,' the citizens demonstrated in the streets, blowing the born biggles or flutes made of small gourds and singing the king's funeral dirges.⁸² The king normally committed suicide, choosing whatever mode was easily attainable.

While one might say that suicide in this case was forced on the obas, the fact he had to comply with conventional rules represents the suicide as an obligation and a duty to the community. Of course the origin of this convention of rejection by the people and suicide by the oba is not known. It probably represents a modification of king murder suggested to have probably prevailed among the ancient Sudanese peoples, a custom still prevalent among the Jukun ethnic group in Benue state of Nigeria.⁸³ But among the Yoruba, as far as records show especially among the Oyo sub-group, the earliest known oba associated with this invitation to suicide was Odarawu who reigned in the seventeenth century.⁸⁴ Okinbaloye, the Ewi of Ado earlier mentioned in this paper also lived in the seventeenth century. There might be obas before century who were invited to commit suicide but the traditions do not say, and as far as evidence can show, obas are known since the eighteenth century to have been invited to die. Oba Adara, the Olowo (king) of Owo was invited by his chiefs in 1800 to die.⁸⁵ In 1834, the chiefs invited Idewu Ojulari, the oba of Lagos to die.⁸⁶ The Osemowe (king) of Ondo, oba Arilekolasi was asked by his chiefs 'to go to sleep' in 1866.⁸⁷ Even as recent as 1914 during the early years of British colonial rule, the machinery for the 'advice' was already set in motion for oba Ademiluyi, the Ooni (king) of Ife when the timely intervention of the colonial administration saved the oba.⁸⁸

81 Odunjo, J.F. *Eko Ijinle Yoruba Alawiye fun awon ile-eko giga Apa keji* (Longmans of Nigeria, 1969) p. 32.

82 O. Oyediran, 'The position of the Ooni in the changing political system of Ile-Ife', *Journal of the historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. No. 4 June 1973, pp. 375-376.

83 Meek, C.K. *A Sudanese kingdom: an ethnographical study of the Jukun-speaking peoples of Nigeria* (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd. 1931) pp. 164-166.

84 Law, R. *The Oyo empire C. 1600-C.1800: a West African Imperialism in the era of the slave trade* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977) pp. 79-80; Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas*, op. cit., pp. 55, 57, 170-174 & 196.

85 *Nigeria population census, 1963*, op. cit., p. 467.

86 Aderibigbe, A.B. *Lagos: the development of an African city* (Longman, Nigeria, 1975) p. 16.

87 A.F.B. Bridges, *Intelligence Report on Ondo District*, op. cit., p. 8.

88 O. Oyediran, 'The position of the Ooni in the changing political system of Ile-Ife' op. cit., p. 376.

The death of a Yoruba oba, irrespective of whether it was natural or it was by suicide usually occasioned numerous other suicides and ritual sacrifices of those who must die with him. Such people were called, *abobaku*,⁸⁹ those destined to die with the oba. In Old Oyo and its offshoot, the New Oyo, the Alafin's eldest son, titled, Aremo, normally committed suicide when his father, the Alafin died.⁹⁰ The enforced suicide of the Aremo, said to date from early eighteenth century probably emanated from the fear of the possibility of parricide and the need to prevent the occurrence. But numerous other officers notably the Iya Naso, head of female priests of Sango, Iyalori, head priest of the god of Ori (head) and Iyamole, head of Ifa female worshippers, the Osi Efa, leader of the palace servants (the ilari) and the olokun esin, who was the Alafin's master of the horse also died with the oba,⁹¹ perhaps their death was meant to prevent these close associates from committing regicide. But the counterparts of these officers, where they existed, did not have to die when the obas died. For instance, the eldest sons of the obas of most of eastern Yoruba kingdoms are titled Abilagba, they had no rights of succession to the throne and had no cause to resort to parricide. But there were *abobaku* in every other Yoruba court, they consisted of wives, servants, eunuchs and slaves.

The number of *abobaku* varied in relation to the estate of the deceased. In the funeral of chiefs, according to the evidence collected in the 1870's in Ondo by the Rev. Charles Phillips, 'two, five, ten or twenty (persons) may be immolated'⁹² whereas at the burial of the Osemowe (king of Ondo) 'more than a hundred persons (are) killed in various ways from the time of his funeral to the installation of his successor.'⁹³ Many of those thus declared immolated on these occasion were in fact suicides. Of those actually immolated, some were killed but some allowed their own

slaughter at the time the corpse was being washed, some at the entrance to the palace, some in the principal places and some during the internment.

Whatever the office of the *abobaku* and in all Yoruba kingdoms, including Benin⁹⁴ which has had a Yoruba dynasty since the thirteenth century, those dying with the oba chose their own mode of suicide and in their own homes or stations.⁹⁵ At the appointed time, kinsmen assembled in the household of an *abobaku* and held a parting feast. The suicide wore his best clothes and mixed freely among the crowd, engaging many of those present in dialogue. The episode of the Alafin's master of the horse which took place as late as 1946 may suffice to illustrate this point. He mixed freely among his kinsmen and in words immortalized (put in his mouth) by Wole Soyinka, intoned.

'My master's hands and mine have always

Dipped together and, home or sacred feast ...

Our joint hands Raised housetops of trust that withstood.

The siege of envy and the termites of time'⁹⁶ This master of the horse, olokun esin thus engaged in a dialogue during which he highlighted the main reasons behind the belief and conventional rules and practices governing self-inflicted deaths among officers who considered their final action as performing a duty for their king and country. Finally while the feast was on, the *abobaku* entered into his house and died in obedience to conventional codes, convinced that he was going into deathland with his master.

Conclusion

This discussion on suicide modes and related underlying cultural attitude among the Yoruba can not claim to be exhaustive, but it would hopefully have upheld and be upheld by Alvarez's warning to the effect that 'no single theory will entangle an act as ambiguous and with such complex motives as suicide.'⁹⁷ This paper is likely to point out that the term, suicide has connotations which differ from culture to culture.

89 Law, R. *The Oyo Empire C.1600-C.1800*, op. cit., p. 65, Talbot, P.A. *The peoples of southern Nigeria: vol. III*, op. cit., p. 479, Babajamu, M., *Yoruba Literature*, op. cit., p. 74.

90 Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 174 & Law, R. *The Oyo Empire C.1600-C.1800*, op. cit., pp. 67 & 68.

91 Clapperton, H., *Journal of a second expedition into the interior of Africa from the Bight of Benin to Soccatto* (London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1966) p. 49; Johnson, S. *The history of the Yorubas*, op. cit., p. 133, & Babajamu, M. *Yoruba Literature*, op. cit., p. 71.

92 Letter from the Rev. Charles Phillips to Governor Moloney, Lagos, 19th Sept. 1887, in colonial Office Records 147/61 vol. iv; deposited at the Public Records Office, London.

93 Letter from the authorities of Ode (town of) Ondo to Governor Moloney, Lagos, 27th Sept. 1887 in Colonial Office Records, 147/61 vol. IV.

94 Talbot, P.A. *The peoples of southern Nigeria*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 485; Roth, L. *Great Benin's customs, art and horrors* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. Reissued, 1968) p. 43.

95 Talbot, P.A. *The peoples of Southern Nigeria*, vol. III, op. cit., p. 479 & Babajamu, M. *Yoruba Literature*, op. cit., p. 74.

96 Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the king's Horseman*, (London, Eyre Methuen, 1975) pp. 14-15.

97 Alvarez, A. *The savage god*, op. cit. Preface p. xii.

But the modes of suicide discussed in this paper have been greatly affected by two major forces namely British colonial rule and modern industrialization. In the first place, the age-long cultural codes which extolled the conventional and institutional suicides among the Yoruba had been broken following the establishment of British colonial rule. When the British intervened in the inter-state politics of the Yoruba in the 1890's, one of the earliest proclamations of the British prohibited human sacrifice and the immolation of slaves among the Yoruba⁹⁸ in particular and Nigerian communities in general. These proclamations led to the gradual abandonment of many of the conventional rules which enforced the rejection and suicide of obas and the accompanying funeral ceremonies involving all manner of human sacrifice. The various Yoruba communities have since substituted livestock for humans as sacrificial victims.⁹⁹

Lugard's indirect rule introduced into Yorubaland in 1914 created a situation whereby the colonial administration began to prop up the obas as traditional rulers and to using them as the main channel of communication between the colonial administration and their various communities. The result was that, once the oba was installed by the people and official recognition was given to the oba by the colonial administration, he became or strived to become a good servant of the colonial government while, in most cases he turned himself into a tyrant and despot over his own subjects. The people have lost their conventional prerogatives and could neither apply nor enforce the codes, had they wished to do so. The result has been that many obas of the Yoruba have ruled at the sufferance of their arrieved subjects. And although the British colonial administration often investigated petitions and when substantiated, banish a few obas, yet, much of the cultural landscape of the Yoruba had been eroded by the colonial administrative system.

Other developments directly resulting from colonial rule have produced new and more complex situations in the communal life of the Yoruba against which the people had no adequate safeguards. For instance, there were no divorce and broken homes in the indigenous Yoruba families, therefore, incidence of suicide arising from break-up of marriage and the attendant complications and crises were not prevalent in the largely rural and agrarian communities of the Yoruba. Thus, the introduction of the British legal system especially the granting of divorce

has thrown the Yoruba family culture overboard and introduced frustrating situations which have become some root causes of increase in the incidences of suicide especially amongst men, women and children whose primary aspirations have been blocked by break-up of families.

Modern industrialization and its geographical and social mobility, rapid urban growth before and during the colonial rule, (the Yoruba was reputedly one of the most urbanized people in the whole of Africa)¹⁰⁰ the resultant drift of the youth in search of the golden fleece and wage employment from the rural to the growing urban centres have combined with other modern developments to undermine indigenous Yoruba communalism. The result has been a gradual but steady collapse and loss of the indigenous therapeutic resources which were available to all and sundry in the old communities. The pressure to achieve the utmost in a situation of harsh economic realities of the times since the 1930's seems to have further complicated issues and intensified the growing tendency to individualism¹⁰¹ and to suicide not only among the Yoruba but among Nigerians and indeed, Africans. Defeat in one's venture and unemployment in a situation where most people are beginning to refuse to be their brothers' keeper often seem to lead many to resort to psychic depression and alcoholism. The availability of a large variety of toxic substances which make suicide easily and cheaply attainable have not helped matters. Thus, although suicides rates were under-reported in indigenous Yoruba societies during the pre-colonial era that is the focus of this paper, and were similarly under-reported during colonial rule and post-colonial era, yet, it is an undeniable fact that suicide rates (with complex causes and modes) have increased in modern times especially among students as well as middle-aged adolescents.

SUMMARY

This paper examines the conventional attitudes of the Yoruba to suicide. Suicide, defined by Farberow as 'self-initiated and self-inflicted

98 A.F. Abel, Intelligence Report on Otun District, *op. cit.* minutes of meeting held at Awtun (Otun) on 28 Feb. 1929 p. 2.

99 Evidence given by Chief Kola Oluwatuyi (The Lisa of Akure and head of Kingmakers) before Ondo state chieftaincy Review Commission, Records of Daily Proceedings, No. 1 Monday 6 June. 1977, p. 12.

100 Walker, F.D. *Africa and her peoples* (London Edinburgh House Press, 1962) p. 40; Hodder, B.W. & U.I. Ukwu, *Markets in West Africa: Studies of Markets and trade among the Yoruba and Ibo* (Ibadan University Press, 1969) pp. 12-13.

101 T. Akingbala, 'Why people commit suicide?' in *Spear, Nigeria's National Magazine*, July 1977, p. 22.

murder' had many connotations among the Yoruba in pre-colonial times. The people abhorred most personal suicides especially those which have the main features of what Durkheim categorized as egoistic and anomic, but extolled his kind of obligatory altruistic. The attitude of the Yoruba to the various suicides was conditioned by their beliefs about death and post-death. Among the Yoruba of the period under reference, natural death consisted in dying at very ripe age, they were accorded fitting and due burial ceremonies-which enabled their souls to go to death-land and join the pantheon of the ancestors. Suicides especially of the 'egoistic' and 'anomic' counted among those whose death were regarded as unnatural. These were denied due burial ceremonies which rendered them incapable of going to death-land and, their memories were generally, except in folklore and in the case of the very lucky few, blotted out.

Considerable amount of customary therapeutic resources, repositied in the Yoruba communalism, were available to the individual and as such cases of personal suicides were few. Yet, suicides prevailed and were motivated by various reasons notably the desire to avenge some personal injury and insults emanating from aggressors and violators, desire to preserve one's honour and dignity in situations of apparent defeat, utter despair and sudden misfortune. Conventional suicides represent those self-murder approved of by custom among wives, slaves and servants of obas and chiefs as well as the custom-enforced suicide among office holders who lived lives of ordered ceremonials. The latter category of people included civil chiefs, royal intendants and the oba of Yoruba states and kingdoms. Custom-enforced suicides were regarded by the suicides as well as the general public as sacred duties to the state.

But most of the Yoruba attitude and the cultural values which extolled the aproved suicides and stipulated disdainful treatment to personal suicides had changed under the impact of British colonial rule and the growth of modern industrialization. While both developments had swept away many of the ancient codes and undermined the Yoruba communal tradition thus seemingly reducing incidences of suicide, they had led to the introduction of new situations for which the Yoruba had had no adequate safeguards and which have tneded to lead more and more people to psychic depression and heightened impulses to suicide among the Yoruba in particular and other Nigerian peoples in general.

