

***OLUSEGUN  
OSOBA***

SOME  
CONSIDERATIONS  
ON THE  
IMPACT  
OF THE WEST  
ON  
***YORUBA CULTURAL  
FORMS***

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Some Considerations on the Impact of the West  
on Yoruba Cultural Forms

by

S. O. Osoba

"Africa knows us and it is good that Africa has known us.... But we find ourselves asking, might it be better if it did not know us quite so well?

Our European civilization has been pouring in everything that it has to give, good, bad and indifferent. And on the other side of the balance sheet is a shame and a shudder which comes to one as one recites it."

-- Dr. Arthur Ramsey (Retired Archbishop of Canterbury) 1957

"Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to oversimplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. The cultural obliteration is made possible by the negation of national reality, by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the banishment of the natives and their customs to outlying districts by colonial society, by expropriation, and by the systematic enslaving of men and women."

-- Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 1961

"A preoccupation with advertising objects from the past, by encouraging in many a romantic longing for a return to pre-industrial simplicities, by its nostalgic celebration of pastoral life, has crippled their thinking. More dangerously, such pastoral notions of how to make Negro civilization illustrious have made it easy for some leaders of Negritude thought to accept, as conducive to the preservation of African values, the political and economic roles assigned to Africa in the neocolonial arrangement -- that of weak political and economic subordinates who supply raw materials to an industrial and powerful West. ...You cannot realistically demand an African cultural renaissance without insisting also upon an autonomous, non-imperialized economic development."

-- Chinweizu, The West and the Rest of Us, 1975



## Introduction

The primary objective of this essay is to make a tentative assessment of the character and consequences of the contact between Western culture and indigenous Yoruba culture from the point of initial impact to the present. There is no naive assumption on my part concerning the possibility of producing, in such a short account, a definitive or even adequate evaluation of such a complex and many-sided phenomenon. On the contrary, I do wish to provoke a dialogue on the issue in the hope that this will stimulate a vigorous study of an important subject that has for long suffered almost total neglect and a conspiracy of silence on the part of students of Yoruba societies.

The discussion is underpinned by a number of theoretical assumptions which I believe should be frankly elaborated to enhance the rationality and intelligibility of the arguments that may ensue from this essay. First, my conceptualisation of culture is comprehensive and global and encompasses the whole range of activities by which members of a society attempt to comprehend the world in which they live, domesticate their physical environment, create the material conditions for dignified and creative human existence and reproduce on a continuous basis their own pocket of the human species. This view of culture totally rejects the position of those students of society, felicitously described by an eminent Nigerian sociologist as "Festac Intellectuals"<sup>1</sup> who tend erroneously



to limit their perception of culture to those marginal and external manifestations of culture like singing and dancing. It is this kind of error that has produced the obsessive concern of most African political decision-makers with organising and staging mammoth cultural festivals of singing and dancing at both the national and pan-African levels. This error, if not directly derived from, has at least the same ancestry as, the Senghorian grand illusion of a pan-Negro or pan-Negro-Barber culture that allegedly has an exclusively "emotive" and "participatory" cognition of reality and is the anti-thesis of the Graeco-Roman or Western rational and analytical cognitive orientation. My own fundamental assumption which is diametrically opposed to negritude or negritude-inspired notions of culture is that every culture, be it African, Western or Oriental has many attributes, including cerebral and affective capabilities, that together form a coherent cultural entity.

Even though there is still much work to be done in the area of determining the precise ways in which two cultures in contact influence, modify or distort each other, it appears to me empirically and logically valid to assume the reality of such mutual and reciprocal impact between two different cultures in contact. It can also be inferred that the circumstances in which the initial contact occurs is of crucial importance in determining the scope and intensity of the impact of one culture on the other. In a contact situation of great inequality in the distribution of material and technological (especially military-technological)



resources between two cultures in contact, it can be logically inferred that the technologically stronger culture becomes dominant while the technologically weaker one becomes subordinate. In this kind of super-ordinate/subordinate power context the chances are that the dominant culture is more active than the subordinate in influencing and transforming various aspects of the other culture that may appear not to have any direct link with military technology and organisation. It is only in a situation of relative equality of the two cultures in contact that each maintains a substantial amount of its autonomy in deciding what cultural forms to borrow from the other and how. Consequently, it is being suggested here that, given the circumstances in which the Yoruba societies came into contact with Western culture in the form of British imperialism, with its vastly superior military technology and transportation system, a situation of Western cultural domination of Yorubaland in a global sense would seem to have been rigged from the very beginning.

It would, therefore, appear to me that any attempt at assessing the impact of the West on Yoruba culture, to be meaningful and useful, must be located squarely in the analytical context of British imperialism in this part of the world. This is a task which, in spite of its obvious necessity, most students of Yoruba society in history, anthropology and sociology have studiously avoided or approached with such hypocritical perfunctoriness. This kind of contextual analysis is bound to dispel another favourite myth of the "Festac Intellectuals".



Ignoring the ramified and drastic transformation of African economies, social structures and the other intellectual, spiritual and emotive aspects of the cultures of the colonised African peoples, these confused intellectuals posit a static, museum notion of African culture. They conjure up hopes of recapturing, in its pure form, the pre-colonial cultures of Africa which, having gone to sleep at the beginning of colonial rule, could now be awakened and put to action as if nothing happened in the intervening decades and centuries. The ideological underpinning of the "Rip Van Winkle" view of the cultures of colonized Africa is a fundamental conservative acquiescence in, and capitulation to, Western cultural domination, even though it is often masqueraded by rhetorical, seemingly brave, cultural-nationalist pronouncements.

For African intellectuals to be able effectively to deal with the abiding crisis of Western-colonial cultural domination of their societies, they must recognise that their cultures have undergone and are undergoing tremendous transmutations and distortions under the impact of Western colonialism and neocolonialism. They must also endeavour to find out the nature and extent of these transmutations as a vital prerequisite of their ability to work out in concert with the masses of their people viable strategies of action for the liberation of their societies from the ramified cultural domination of the West. The all-pervading and persistent cultural confusion in the vast majority of "independent" African states since the 1960's is the direct



consequence of an inability or unwillingness or both on the part of African intellectuals and political decision-makers to pose the question of national culture correctly and in the context of the present realities of their societies and their historical, precisely colonial, antecedents. The propagandistic campaign of the "Festac intellectuals" concerning the "authenticity" and reality of African culture (translated into formalistic and inane actions like arts festivals and the replacement of European colonial names with indigenous African names) is constantly contradicted by the everyday experience of the peoples, victims of this dishonest propaganda, who see that several crucial and substantive areas of their culture (e.g. their economy, their political system and its bureaucracy, the education of their youth) are mere appendages and caricatures of the metropolitan forms.

The durability of this false notion of culture in intellectual and political decision-making circles imposes on us the urgent task of conducting and popularising studies and analyses of our cultural experience that will demythologise our various cultures and contribute to the development of an intellectual tradition of combative and critical analysis so indispensable for the cultural liberation of the African peoples. The urgency of this task is further underscored by the all-pervading intellectual laziness and the indifference of the various African national bourgeois elites who have up till now shown a total lack of awareness of this critical problem which was sharply raised by Frantz Fanon as far back as 1961:



...This persistence in following forms of cultures which are already condemned to extinction is already a demonstration of nationality; but it is a demonstration which is a throw-back to the laws of inertia. There is no taking of the offensive and no re-defining of relationships. There is simply a concentration on a hard core of culture which is becoming more and more shrivelled up, inert and empty. 2

1. The Economic Life of the Yoruba in a Changing Colonial Situation

British colonial rule over Yorubaland which dates back to the forcible annexation of Lagos in 1861 was, like all other varieties of European colonial rule in Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries, primarily concerned with the exploitation of the economic resources (human and material) of the colonised peoples. The principal objective of this exploitation was to siphon resources away from Yorubaland for the benefit of British industries and of the British monopoly finance capital that owned them and controlled their operation.

The two critical areas of the economy of Yorubaland in which the colonial authorities and British monopoly capital were most interested are agriculture and commerce. This interest manifested itself in the determination of the British to wrest the initiative for decision-making in these two sectors and, therefore, control them for the benefit of vested British interests. This invasion of the agricultural and commercial sectors of the Yoruba economy was of paramount importance as they accounted for the employment of virtually all the adult labour force in Yorubaland. Yoruba agriculture was, in the course of the first three decades of this century, substantially side-tracked into



the cultivation of cocoa as an export crop exclusively for the consumption of Britain's industrial enterprise. The methods used by the British raj in Nigeria to achieve this massive diversion of agricultural labour away from producing largely to meet the food and other needs of the Yoruba communities and their neighbours to working in essence for factories located thousands of miles away have been discussed elsewhere and need not detain us here.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, important to note that, in sucking an inordinately large section of the farming population of Yorubaland into the new economic activity of growing cocoa for export, the British made no technological input whatsoever into the mode of agricultural production. The result is that while the agricultural communities in Yorubaland became increasingly commercialized and monetized, they remained as technologically backward as ever. The primitive, back-breaking hoe and cutlass culture, still dominant among Yoruba farmers, was just efficient enough to ensure that British and other Western chocolate industries got as much cocoa as they wanted, but condemned the vast majority of individual Yoruba farmers to low, sometimes declining, productivity and progressive impoverishment.<sup>4</sup>

Another significant distortion wrought by cocoa cultivation on the Yoruba economy and society was in the drastic and progressive transformation of the time-honoured system of land tenure and land use. Up to the introduction of cocoa in the opening decade of this century the dominant principle guiding land tenure was that of communal ownership, either by whole



communities or extended families. Under this system, land could not be alienated permanently to or by any individual, even though every member of the land-owning community or lineage had unrestricted access to the use of as much of the collectively owned land as was consistent with the competing needs and demands of other members. However, as the commercial ethos and the grasping individualism engendered by the cocoa cash crop economy became firmly established, politically influential and financially ambitious elements among the peasant communities began to appropriate vast acreages of farm land for their own exclusive use and at the expense of the weaker and less aggressive members of the community or lineage. This development had advanced so far by the 1950's, the decade of cocoa boom par excellence, that the permanent alienation of farmland by straightforward commercial transactions had become a common feature of life in the cocoa belt of Yorubaland. Justice G. B. A. Coker's detailed and informed study of the law of family property among the Yoruba, published in the 1960's, fully corroborates the growing significance of the individualisation and commercialisation of land holding and ownership:

...the native laws and customs of the Nigerians have been modified from time to time, owing to the influence of various social and political agencies. Strict and orthodox native law and custom does not recognise the sale of land... Almost everywhere, however, modern dealings compel a relaxation of the old systems and sales of land are now a part of the normal occurrences of everyday economic and legal activities. 5



In a situation like this, in which land distribution was no longer based exclusively, or even largely, on the traditional criteria of competing needs and capacity to work the land, where considerable parcels of land held by individuals no longer reverted to the common family or communal pool for redistribution on the holders' death, and where existing family and communal reserves were being increasingly alienated to people who could pay cash for them, the land resources at the disposal of poor families have tended to remain constant or even to decrease in spite of substantial increases in the size of such families. One inevitable consequence of such a development was a growing inequality in the distribution of land as between relatively prosperous and poor farming families. The position in the cocoa-producing areas of Yorubaland exemplifies the startling degree to which this inequality had progressed by 1951-53 when Galletti, Baldwin and Dina made a survey of these areas. Among the 686 families surveyed, just over two per cent held twenty-and-a-half per cent of all the land cultivated for both cocoa and food crops (with an average holding of 198.42 acres per family). On the other end of the spectrum fifty-five per cent of all the families held only nineteen-and-a-half per cent of the land (with an average holding of less than five acres per family). It is no surprise, therefore, that the three researchers who analysed the result of this survey came to the conclusion that the smaller shares of land, which were by far the most predominant, were "not enough to yield more than a bare subsistence"



and that "many Yoruba cocoa-farming families cannot derive a tolerable living from their farms alone".<sup>6</sup> Further developments along this line in the late 1950's and the 1960's have produced much greater inequality in land distribution to the point that a considerable proportion (sometimes exceeding 50 per cent) of the peasant communities in the major cocoa-growing areas of Ibadan, Ife, Egba and Ondo operate either as tenant farmers or farm labourers.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the progressive impoverishment of the masses of Yoruba peasant farmers as a result of the gross inequality in land distribution, several concrete policy measures taken by the colonial administration exposed the peasant farmers to more rigorous exploitation both by the colonial government and foreign monopoly capitalist interests, and had the effect of making peasant farming all the more unrewarding for the primary producers. The system of produce-buying throughout the colonial period was based on a virtual monopoly of the business by the big foreign capitalist concerns (e.g. the U.A.C., John Holt, P.Z., U.T.C., S.C.O.A. and C.F.A.O.), assisted by a pyramidal network of indigenous produce buyers and their myriads of agents who served as middlemen between the primary peasant producers and the giant foreign monopolies, and drastically reduced the earnings of the primary producers by various stratagems ranging from usury to specially induced fluctuations in producer prices within a single season and from one season to another. The Cocoa Pool Agreement concluded in 1937 among the six biggest firms in West Africa



with the primary purpose of imposing a drastic reduction in cocoa buying prices on the producers is a good example of how far the foreign monopoly concerns were prepared to go in their exploitation of the "natives". In spite of the spirited protests against this notorious plan in the cocoa-growing areas of Ghana and Nigeria, and the establishment by the British government in 1939 of a central state control on the purchase of cocoa and other agricultural products from its West African colonies, the Yoruba peasant producers got pretty little relief from their exploitation by the foreign monopoly firms. This was because the West African Produce Control Board and its successors, the separate territorial Produce Marketing Boards and Produce Marketing Companies, ensured right up to the late 1950's that the big foreign firms continued to have a preponderant share of the purchasing business and, therefore, of the capability to determine the prices paid to the producers.

An even more vicious form of exploitation of the farming communities by the colonial government was the creation of the marketing board reserves by withholding from the farmers a substantial part of the selling prices of their produce on the world market. For instance, between 1939/40 and 1950/51 producer prices were generally 2.5 to 3 times less than the selling prices on the London and New York markets.<sup>8</sup> These so-called marketing board reserves, ostensibly created and accumulated to "stabilise" producer prices by subsidising them in years when prices slumped on the world market, were hardly ever used for this declared purpose.



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On the contrary, they were invested in Britain either in "gilt-edged securities" or saved with British banks in the form of "sterling assets". In either form, it meant that the predominantly impoverished peasant producers, who were themselves in dire need of capital development programmes, were actually being compelled to subsidize the further development of metropolitan Britain. It is symptomatic of the ruthless manner in which Britain siphoned resources from her colonies that in June 1958 when Nigerian ministers and public officers were roaming all over Europe (including Britain) and North America and begging, largely unsuccessfully, for development loans, Nigeria had well over two hundred million pounds sterling invested in Britain predominantly from the marketing board reserves.<sup>9</sup>

## II. The Colonial Economy, Western Education and the Emerging Yoruba Society.

The Nigerian colonial economy, into which most of Yorubaland had been more or less integrated by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, has exerted tremendous influence on the structure of Yoruba society. By introducing a variety of exploitative factors into the "native" economy, the colonial authorities and their foreign business agents succeeded in stimulating the emergence of a new pattern of social-class differentiation and a whole set of new social relations of production and consumption. For instance, as British rule in Nigeria became more effectively established in the opening decades of the twentieth century, the most lucrative areas of the Nigerian



economy --the export trade in cash crops, the import trade in manufactured goods, and mining-- came under the monopolistic control of British firms and the protective umbrella of the British colonial government. Moreover, the banking institutions which financed these economic activities and became substantially enriched by them were British (Barclays and Standard) and did everything, including their discriminatory loans policies against the "natives", to buttress the control of British monopoly capital on the whole economy.

Consequently, apart from subsistence farming, fishing, hunting and crafts in which the vast majority of the population was engaged, the only other economic activities open to Nigerians, unequipped with some measure of Western literary education, were the small-scale cultivation of cash crops like cocoa, groundnuts, oil palm, cotton, and rubber; petty trading in farm produce or imported manufactured articles, which on the whole guaranteed little more than mere subsistence. They could also go into wage employment as unskilled labour on the larger cash-crop farms, at the docks, mines, in civil construction and on the railways --menial jobs which have always been poorly remunerated in the Nigerian economic system. Perhaps, the only significant exception to this pattern of foreign monopoly of the big plums of Nigerian commerce are the major commercial transactions in the export of kola nuts from the forest regions of Yorubaland to the northern emirates and the reciprocal export trade in cattle, sheep and goats from the savannah regions of the



north to all parts of southern Nigeria. Both of these commercial enterprises have long been dominated by rich Hausa-Fulani magnates with a large number of lesser folk from both regions of the country serving as agents and middlemen.

The only other career opportunities in the colonial economic system which were relatively better remunerated and permitted a measure of upward social mobility were virtually closed to those Nigerians who had not acquired some Western education. These include careers as minor and intermediate functionaries in the colonial bureaucracy and foreign commercial firms as clerks, technicians and artisans, and in the schools and Christian missions as teachers, catechists and priests. Some indigenous businessmen emerged as moderately substantial proteges to the foreign firms (in the capacity of produce buyers, factors and agents for distributing manufactured goods on wholesale and retail basis), but even among such people survival and growth were more assured for those who had acquired literacy or had reliable literate subordinates.

It was not until the post-World War II period, especially from 1952 onwards, in a situation of aggressive bourgeois nationalism, scrambled decolonization and explosion in educational opportunities at all levels, that a substantial Nigerian bourgeoisie or "power elite", capable of sharing power with the established British authorities in government, the bureaucracy, commerce and banking, began to emerge.<sup>10</sup> The close collaboration that has developed since 1952 between this foster Nigerian "power"



elite and British monopoly capital in Nigeria has become the necessary condition for the establishment and expansion of the neocolonial dependence of the Nigerian economy on the world imperialist system since the attainment of independence in October 1960. This neocolonial dependence has merely confirmed, even enlarged, and diversified the traditional pattern of Western monopoly capitalist exploitation of the resources of Nigeria, with the up and coming Western-educated indigenous bourgeoisie acting as a junior partner and very pleased with the financial crumbs that it picked from the master's table.

Since the Lagos Yoruba were among the first Nigerian ethnic groups to produce members of this collaborative national bourgeoisie, thanks to the accident of their nearness to the coast and, therefore, of their early contact with European Christian missionaries and Western-type education, the Yoruba bourgeois elite of the 1930's and 1940's began to put up an air of arrogance vis-a-vis the other Nigerian ethnic groups, and to measure the "progress" made towards self-rule by Nigeria's major groups exclusively in terms of how much "Western culture" they had acquired. The following statement penned by Chief Obafemi Awolowo in 1947 is symptomatic of this baseless cultural arrogance among his contemporaries:

In embracing Western culture, the Yorubas take the lead, and have benefitted immensely as a result. The Efiks, the Ijaws, the Ibibios and the Ibos come next. The Hausas and Fulanis on the other hand are extremely conservative, and take reluctantly to Western civilization... And if the race is to the swift, in spite of their lower cultural background, the Ibos or the Ibibios would certainly qualify for self-government, long before the Hausas. 11



Contrary to Chief Awolowo's alleged correlation between the acquisition of "Western culture" and "progress", the evidence available to us about the growth and behavioural pattern of the Western-educated Yoruba elite and its impact on the mass culture of the Yoruba, leads us to a different conclusion. It appears to me that the growth in the numbers of the Western-educated Yoruba elite and in the variety of the occupational roles they perform has been accompanied by a substantial weakening in the cohesiveness and cultural integrity of the various Yoruba communities. The dissemination of Western literary education in Yorubaland, like the Christian religion to which it was closely allied at the beginning and with which it is still very closely linked, tended to create a dichotomous relationship between the traditional indigenous values and mores of the Yoruba and those being peddled by its champions. Western education, especially the variety of it provided in Christian missionary schools, was from the very beginning aimed at subverting the indigenous culture of the people (regarded as "primitive" and "sinful") and at producing young men and women thoroughly immersed in the supposedly superior European christian culture. Consequently, indigenous religious songs, dances, drama, games and art were all condemned by the missionary teachers as "pagan" and proscribed from the school curricula. On the contrary, the programmes of these schools bristled with bible reading, history of Europe and of European activities among the "inferior races". European songs and music and the study of English literary classics.



The foundation was laid pretty early in the history of Western education among the Yoruba and the other Nigerian ethnic groups for the creation of an indigenous elite, arrogant towards and alienated from the masses of its people, but with a deep sense of inferiority and subservience vis-a-vis its European beneficiaries who had equipped it with a strange and exotic Western culture whose main relevance lay in its being a useful instrument for the oppression and victimisation of the illiterate "native" masses.

The Westernizing programme of the British has had very serious implications for the social integrity and cultural identity of the Yoruba and other Nigerian communities. For instance, children sent to Western-type schools are ipso facto denied a full opportunity of acquiring other forms of education and training which are more relevant for a rounded and properly integrated role performance in the cultural milieu into which they were born. Consequently, the more acculturated into the Western educational system a Yoruba man is, the less knowledgeable he generally is of the Yoruba language, of his family and lineage traditions, Yoruba folk music, dances, games, social graces and other skills that are automatically acquired in a purely indigenous milieu and constitute the substance of a coherent Yoruba culture. This has tended to produce an untenable situation in which many highly educated Yoruba in the Western tradition are torn between two cognitive and cultural worlds, neither of which they fully understand and identify with --



a situation posing serious problems of identity and intellectual creativity for the individuals concerned.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the Institute of Education in the University of Ife had to mount an experimental Yoruba language primary school programme with one of its objectives being to prove to the policy makers that Yoruba children could learn more effectively and creatively in their mother tongue than in English at this most formative stage in their development constitutes a good measure of the crisis of identity and values that is at the core of the Western system of education imposed on us by British colonial rule.

One of the major manifestations of this crisis of identity is the emergence of a Westernized elite whose members have varying degrees of competence in English language, adopt European cultural postures and are detached and alienated from the mass of non-literate, non-English speaking Yoruba men and women with whom they are largely unable and unwilling to communicate. In effect, the Yoruba people, like other Nigerian peoples, have been dichotomised into two cultures and two nations: one indigenous, illiterate and underprivileged, the other a Western caricature, literate and overprivileged.

British colonial rule with its Western education has also radically affected the development of the Yoruba society by disrupting the pre-colonial social structure and the distribution of political power in the various communities. Before the establishment of British colonial rule in Yorubaland some seventy to eighty years ago there were three main types of soc



political systems: the autonomous village society, the city-state or kingdom with its peripheral villages and smaller towns, and the empire encompassing several kingdoms, peripheral towns and villages. While these three state formations varied considerably in the degree of mass participation in decision making and of organisational bureaucratisation, they were all underpinned to a greater or lesser extent by a rudimentary democratic ethos based on "the diffused authority of a complex of elders, councils and popular approval".<sup>13</sup> The British raj, finding this diffused system of allocating power and authority a balky instrument for executing his hostile and autocratic will on the people, proceeded to distort the indigenous system by subordinating everything and everybody to a new "praetorian" system presided over by British political officers. However, the harsh necessities of colonial rule, especially the dearth of suitable Britons to appoint as political officers on the spot, compelled the colonial power to seek out, or sometimes even invent, a chief whom it invested with autocratic powers undreamt of in the precolonial society and held responsible for making his community toe the new subservient line prescribed by the new masters.

Here, therefore, was the beginning of the process whereby indigenous Yoruba rulers were forcibly relieved of their time-honoured obligation to rule with the consent of their people and with a primary concern for their welfare. The legitimacy which, in the pre-colonial society, was based on communal participation in political decision-making was replaced by one dependent on the



However, as a result of the operation of the British colonial system with its inputs of a new transportation system (rail, road and ports), an export-oriented economy and a new network of administrative centres, which did not often coincide with the pre-colonial centres of political power and influence, the rate and pattern of urban development under colonial rule diverged significantly from what obtained in pre-colonial times.

For example, as a result of the operation of the colonial government's Township Ordinance of 1917, some selected towns relevant to the functioning of the colonial administration and in some cases, only recently created by it, were put into three categories in descending order of significance. Lagos, which was the seat of the central government, the main port and railway terminal and having by far the largest share of European immigrant population in Nigeria was the only first class township until the end of World War II when the ordinance was overtaken by new constitutional developments. Second class townships consisted principally of large centres of trade located either along the railway line or on the coast. In 1919, there were eighteen such townships (12 in the Southern Provinces and 6 in the North), but by 1936 their number had been reduced to twelve (7 in the South and 5 in the North). This category did not include even those large population centres and repositories of significant political power and influence in pre-colonial times, like Sokoto, Benin, Oyo and Ijebu-Ode, simply because they did not fit significantly into the colonial transportation and export



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trade systems. They were, therefore, designated third class townships (apart from Oyo which was not even classed at all) along with 47 other towns, making fifty in all by 1919. These third class townships were described as "government stations, with a small but mixed population". This characterisation clearly betrays government's obsessive concern with administrative imperatives, but is palpably false in the case of towns like Ife, Ondo, Ijebu-Ode, Sokoto, Bida, Benin, Agbor and Arochukwu which were all relatively old and major centres of population, trade, political power and influence in pre-colonial times.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most significant ways in which the operation of the Township Ordinance of 1917 affected the character of Yoruba and other Nigerian urban centres was through the distribution of modern social amenities which Professor Mabogunje with characteristic mot juste has described as "governmental amenities"<sup>15</sup> This is because these amenities tended to be provided in towns that served as important administrative centres with a substantial component of expatriate colonial officials. For instance, by 1936 there were twelve European and fifty-six African hospitals, located predominantly in towns designated as first, second and third classes. The provision of pipe-borne water and electricity followed the same pattern. By 1950, Lagos (1st class), eleven second class towns, five third class and two unclassified towns (Ogbomoso and Ilorin) had public pipe-borne water supply systems. In the same year public electricity installations were available in twenty towns -- one first class, twelve second class, three



The "flight to towns" has also created over time many critical problems for the major urban centres. For one thing, the populations of the major towns and cities have grown far beyond their capability effectively to absorb the influx of immigrants physically and psychologically. Among the main indicators of the low absorptive capacity of these towns are the high incidence of unemployment, marginal employment and occupational begging, the chronic shortage of decent accommodation and the resultant prohibitive cost of housing, the scandalous congestion of the residential areas and the proliferation of unsightly and insanitary slums<sup>18</sup> -- ideal breeding grounds for endemic diseases as the cholera outbreak of 1970-71 in Nigeria tragically demonstrated.

The combination of these harsh living and working conditions for immigrants into the large urban centres has tended to produce a considerable degree of instability and insecurity among the generality of urban dwellers, especially among the so-called 'stranger' elements, who have the most critical problems of gainful employment and housing. In a situation where too few jobs and houses are being chased by too many people, the poorer indigenes ("sons of the soil" in popular Yoruba parlance) tend to resent the "stranger" who, either by virtue of his superior skill or his contacts, manages to secure a substantial job and a decent house. Many "strangers", on the other hand, tend to resent what they regard as the hostile and inhospitable attitude of their hosts, which often forces them to live precariously on the fringes of their host communities.



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society, the extended family was, among other things, a closely integrated production unit which collectively owned farm land, the most crucial factor of production. Within this closely integrated social and production unit, the authority and control of the head of the lineage over all its members derived ultimately from the powers vested in him by tradition over the allocation of portions of the family pool of land to all his kinsmen for their individual use. But once it became relatively easy for members of the lineage to secure other means of livelihood independently of the family land resources and, therefore, of the family head, his authority over such kinsmen started to crumble. The cohesiveness of the extended family has been the main victim of this development.

This process of disintegration has not been helped at all by the frequent incidence of a significant differentiation in educational and income levels within the extended family. The process of change, identified in the indigenous sector of Ibadan by Mabogunje as "growth by fission" resulting in a breakdown, not only in the control mechanism within the extended family, but also in the physical embodiment of that family, Agboole (compound),<sup>19</sup> is a pervasive one in all Yoruba communities, urban or rural, albeit in varying degrees of rapidity and extent. This is largely because the more Westernized and affluent members of the family, whether they are living "at home" or "abroad", tend to become dissatisfied with the communal living in the compound, which makes the preservation of individual or



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powers to annul, reverse, or modify the decisions of these courts. J. S. Coleman even justifies this palpably anomalous arrangement by invoking one of the most notorious myths underpinning British colonial rule among the "natives":

...the stringency of supervision was not necessarily the result of hunger for power, but rather of a passion to achieve and maintain certain minimum standards of justice and administrative efficiency. 20

The injection of an inscrutable foreign element (i.e. the authoritarianism of the British political officer and the Western-educated Yoruba court clerk) into the administration of justice at the level of local government tended to divorce it, to a significant extent, from the time-honoured traditions of the people. Even though many more cases are brought before these customary courts than before the British-type courts, they have a very limited acceptance by the masses of non-Westernised Yoruba. This can be estimated from the failure of the British colonial authorities and their Nigerian successors to stamp out the so-called "illegal courts" operating outside the ken of district officers, residents, or divisional advisers. The simple truth is that many Yoruba, especially in the rural areas, are happier to appeal to these "illegal courts" for justice.

The case of the British-style courts has proved even more incongruous with the pre-colonial principles of law and justice and with the prevailing realities of contemporary Yoruba society. The courts operated and still operate on the basis of British common law elaborated in English by officers of the court in possession of this esoteric knowledge.



opportunity of sharing materially and symbolically in the good fortunes of their more affluent kinsmen and kinswomen.

One important aspect of Yoruba culture that has come under a severe impact from Western culture is the administration of law and justice. The half-hearted attempts of the British colonial administration in this century to harmonise the administration of justice by establishing a hierarchy of courts, broadly divided into "native" or "customary" courts (including district and provincial courts) and British-style courts (magistrate, high and supreme courts) produced a highly bureaucratised judicial system, suitable for an authoritarian colonial rule but without achieving the declared objective of a viable synthesis of the indigenous and British notions and practice of justice. One significant explanation for this gap between pronouncement and action was the supercilious racist attitude with which the pioneers of colonial rule in Nigeria approached the cultures of the Yoruba and other Nigerian peoples who, in the view of racist colonial officers, lacked any civilized notions of law and justice.

Consequently, the so-called "native" courts in Yorubaland, while ostensibly operating on the basis of pre-colonial customary law, had very limited jurisdiction and were subjected to the rigorous supervision and control of British political officers. It was of little import to the British colonial authorities that, even though many of these political officers (district Officers and residents) had no formal training in either British or indigenous law, they nonetheless had almost limitless



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Even when interpreters are provided for the benefit of non-English speaking litigants and accused persons, the possibility of misrepresentation of the factual depositions through faulty translation are limitless, apart from the fact that nobody ever endeavours to translate the legal arguments to a non-English speaking participant in a law suit. It is for considerations like these that K. A. Busia's comment on the colonial legal system bequeathed to newly independent African polities is particularly apt in relation to the Yoruba and other Nigerians:

The mystification of the law, and its divorce from the active daily life of the community, made the legal profession - a necessary and lucrative one in Africa. Litigants needed guidance through the maze that the law became to the majority of citizens. This situation has had the effect of altering the essential nature of law as a social institution reflecting societal norms and goals. 21

Apart from this phenomenon of the "mystification of the law" access to the British-style courts is barred to most Yoruba by a complex of factors. These include the excessively high cost of litigation; the long delay in the disposition of cases, caused by a shortage of judges and magistrates, the labyrinth of bureaucratic processes that have to be complied with before a case is considered as properly listed before the court, and the obstructionism and corruption of some court officials.

One additional factor of confusion in the operation of British law and justice in Nigeria is that, since its establishment, certain types of conduct, which either did not exist in pre-colonial times or were not considered criminal, have come



to attract criminal signification and penalties. For instance, the equivalent of the law of assault and battery in most Yoruba communities was more flexible than its British counterpart and was generally interpreted to exclude the case of a person meting out instant physical punishment to another caught stealing or trespassing on his property. Furthermore, traffic offences, especially in relation to the driving of motor vehicles and the riding of bicycles or motor cycles, were unknown in pro-colonial Yoruba communities. Given the high rate of illiteracy among those steering such vehicles on our roads and the feeble communication system operating in the country, it is not surprising that ignorance of the legal regulations governing these offences exist on a massive scale.

Since it is one of the cardinal principles of British law that "ignorance of the law is no excuse", the average law-abiding citizen has tended to treat the law enforcement officers, the police, with great awe and to avoid them studiously for fear of being entrapped with laws that he does not know about. Some members of the police force have also tended to take advantage of this situation to intimidate and exploit members of the public who fall into their net. Perhaps the most culpable in this regard are the traffic policemen who "ambush" commercial drivers on high ways, collect "tolls" from them routinely and slap all sorts of criminal charges (genuine and spurious) on those who refuse to comply with their extortionate demands. It has also been repeatedly established in court proceedings that members of



the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police force often treat a suspect or an accused person who, by law, should be "presumed innocent until proved guilty", with the savagery and disrespect that even a condemned person should not suffer.

Consequently, the police force, which is a law enforcement agency, has acquired such a badly tarnished public image that it seldom gets the willing and enthusiastic cooperation of the public that it so vitally needs to discharge effectively its duties of maintenance of law and order and of crime detection.

It is also well known that in the area of civil law, the British legal and judicial system has progressively distorted the time-tested concepts and practices of our people. Two important areas of distortion deserve attention. First, thanks to the compelling example of Lagos, where British individualist norms of property ownership have been in operation for more than a century, the indigenous Yoruba custom of communal or family ownership of land has been constantly and progressively assaulted in practice. The permanent alienation of communal or family land (or one's share of it) through sale has become increasingly significant during this century, the degree varying with the level of commercial and monetary activity going on in a particular locality. Consequently many Yoruba communities have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of disputes over land ownership and in the volume of litigation arising from such disputes.



The other major area of distortion is that of marriages contracted under British colonial law. This law exists side by side with several varieties of Yoruba customary law of marriage. The colonial law, recently modified by the Matrimonial Causes Decree of 1970, is informed by the European christian principles of "one man one wife to the exclusion of all others", and the virtual permanence of the union between husband and wife. The first of these principles makes the taking of another wife or husband, while the original marriage has not been judicially dissolved, a criminal offence punishable by a fine of ₦1,000 or five years' imprisonment or both. The second makes divorce a lengthy, often messy business. Even though many Westernized Yoruba, especially among the Christians, subscribe to this kind of foreign marriage, experience has shown that the contracting parties are not always able to observe the first principle. However, for reasons of convenience (sometimes considerations of economic security, the welfare of the issues of the marriage, fears of dirty publicity etc.), the injured party (more often the woman than the man) does not usually initiate divorce proceedings against her husband. On the contrary, she often settles for co-existence with another "wife" or other "wives", either under the same roof or living apart from the "lawfully wedded couple". The current status of the Matrimonial Causes Decree, therefore, is that, in practice, it is treated largely as a joke, with most of the contracting parties breaking it with what amounts to almost complete abandon and immunity.



On the whole, it would appear as if the most significant contribution made by the superimposition of British principles of law and justice on the Yoruba society has been to prevent the emergence and consolidation of a common pan-Yoruba consciousness of law and justice. Apart from fragmenting the administration of customary justice on the basis of local parochial customs, the operation of British-type legal and judicial system has further widened the physical and psychological gap separating the Westernized and non-Westernized sections of the Yoruba society.

#### CONCLUSION

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to draw up a balance sheet on the Western invasion of the Yoruba culture area. However, the general assessment by Dr. Arthur Ramsey (quoted at the beginning of this essay) of European historical contact with Africa would seem eminently applicable to the Yoruba experience. It cannot be doubted that certain incidental technical and intellectual skills have accrued to the Yoruba people as a result of colonial and post-colonial acculturation into Western ways. There is hardly any aspect of Yoruba material and spiritual existence that has not been touched by Western technology, socio-political systems, economic principles and practice, literary education and the Christian religion.

The problematic issue, however, is whether a viable cultural synthesis has emerged from this interaction. My position is that only a monstrous hybrid culture has emerged.



And, from the point of view of our people, it has a preponderant content of dependence on, and subservience to the West. There is no sector of the population more afflicted by this dependence mentality than our highly Western-educated technocratic and bureaucratic elite. Whether members of this elite operate in the public service, Universities and other educational institutions, in the professions and in business, they have collectively failed to transcend the colonial bequest of values, attitudes and style of life that alienates them from the masses of their people and detaches them from the stark realities of their society. In such a situation of alienation and isolationism, genuinely creative intellectual and physical work becomes an almost total impossibility. In place of creativity we have, at best, formal technical competence, measured in crude quantitative terms and, at worst, grotesque mediocrity masquerading as genius.

This crisis of the Westernised elite would not have been particularly worrying, if one did not notice even at the level of ordinary Yoruba folk the serious damage already done to the integrity of their historical consciousness and, therefore, their cultural identity by the aggressive proselytisation of the Christian missions and the political manipulation of the people by the colonialists and their indigenous agents. Even though students of Yoruba history complacently regard the reenactment of the coronation and funeral ceremonies of Yoruba obas and of important festivals as crucial sources of Yoruba history, the alarming evidence that is coming to light from recent field



research among the Ondo and Ikale peoples is that more often than not the chief custodians of these cultural traditions have been so christianized that they are actually suffering from a serious case of cultural amnesia. This cultural amnesia is also further induced by the growing dispersal of a literary culture. A pervasive experience among the Ikale informants particularly the literate ones that we interviewed over a one-year period from August 1974 was that people no longer derived their consciousness and knowledge of their own history primarily from traditions transmitted from their ancestors through several generations, but rather from the Intelligence and Assessment Reports compiled in the 1930's by some ignorant British district officers using incompetent Yoruba interpreters.

It would appear to me that the Yoruba, like all the other colonised and neocolonised peoples, cannot deal effectively with their crisis of national culture outside the framework of a revolutionary struggle against the domination of Western culture and for an autonomous, self-reliant society. I cannot but agree fully with Frantz Fanon when he insists that:

A struggle which mobilises all classes of the people and which expresses their aims and their impatience, which is not afraid to count almost exclusively on the people's support, will of necessity triumph. 22



# FOOTNOTE

1. This formulation belongs to Dr. Omafume F. Onoge of the Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan.
2. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York, Grove Press, 1963) p.191
3. S. O. Osoba, "The Phenomenon of Labour Migration in the Era of British Colonial Rule: A Neglected Aspect of Nigeria's Social History," J.H.S.N. Vol. IV No.4 pp.524-27.
4. See Galletti, Baldwin and Dina, Nigerian Cocoa Farmers (London, Oxford University Press, 1956) pp.151-2
5. G. B. A. Coker, Family Property Among the Yorubas (London, 1966) 2nd ed., pp.34-35
6. Galletti, Baldwin and Dina, op. cit., pp.151-152
7. See I. H. Vanden Driesen, "Patterns of Landholding and Land Distribution in the Ife Division of Western Nigeria", AFRICA, Vol. XL1, No. 1. Jan. 1971 pp.42-53.  
This essay is based on a survey of 1,000 farming households conducted by the author in 1968-69 and establishes the preponderance of leasehold titles to land among the surveyed households (51.1 per cent) as opposed to those households owning the land they farmed (43.6 per cent) -- See p.44 in particular.
8. See L. V. Gontcharov, "Gosudarstvenno - monopolisticheskiye eksportnye organizatsii v Zapadnoi Afrike v usloviakh angliiskogo kolonialnogo rezhima" in the book Afrikanskii Sbornik (Ekonomika), (Moscow, 1964) pp.48-88
9. Nigeria, Federal House of Representatives Debates (to be subsequently identified as H.R.D.), 4th April, 1960 1960/61 Session, vol. II col.794.
10. For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon see S. O. Osoba "La Elite Nigeriana del Poder", Nuestro Tiempo (Pamplona), No. 209, November 1971, pp.37-61, originally presented under the title, The Nigerian "Power" Elite, 1952-65: A Study in Some Problems of Social Change, at the 16th Annual Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, December, 1970
11. Obafemi Awolowo, Path to Nigerian Freedom (London, Faber and Faber, 1947) p.49



12. For a detailed discussion of this problem see S. O. Osoba, "Intellectual Aridity in Nigeria", Theory and Practice, Journal of the Nigerian Academy of Arts, Sciences and Technology, No.1, 1974, pp.31-79; and reprinted under the title, "Factors Militating Against Creative and Socially Relevant Intellectual Activity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Nigeria", in G. O. Onibonoje, Kole Omotoso and O. A. Lawal (eds.), The Indigenous for National Development (Ibadan, Onibonoje Press and Book Industries, 1976) pp. 71-97
13. See Rupert Emerson, From Empire to Nation: The Rise to Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962) p.250
14. See Akin L. Mabogunje, Urbanization in Nigeria (London, University of London Press, 1968) p.113
15. Ibid., p.114
16. Ibid., pp.114-115
17. See S. O. Osoba. The Phenomenon of Labour Migration..., op. cit., pp.531-2
18. See A. L. Mabogunje, Yoruba Towns (Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1962) pp.14-15
19. A. L. Mabogunje, Urbanization in Nigeria, op. cit., p.226
20. J. S. Coleman, Nigeria: Background to Nigerian Nationalism (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1963) p.54
21. K. A. Busia, The Challenge of Africa, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967) p.75
22. Frantz Fanon, op. cit., p.197