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Colonial Politics and Precolonial History: Everyday Knowledge, Genre, and Truth in a Yoruba Town

Insa Nolte

Abstract: This article suggests that colonial African historiography was shaped both by the textual forms and conventions associated with local historical knowledge and by the complex political interests which emerged under colonial rule. Based on a case study of two linked debates in the small Yoruba town of Ode Remo, the article argues that beyond narratives, local historical knowledge was also contained, sometimes opaquely, in a variety of other genres and practices. During the colonial period, traditionally segmented and distributed forms of knowledge were brought together in civic debates to constitute a more general history. But while historical accounts could be inflected under political pressure or even to reflect widespread local ambitions, the enduring presence of historical knowledge in textual forms used in everyday life meant that there nonetheless remained an overall sense of what was true within the community.

Résumé: Cet article suggère que l'historiographie de la colonisation en Afrique a été influencée à la fois par les textes et conventions associés avec la connaissance de l'histoire locale et les intérêts politiques complexes qui ont émergé sous la domination coloniale. En se basant sur deux débats liés dans la petite ville Yoruba de Ode Remo, cet article soutient qu'au-delà des récits, la connaissance de l'histoire locale est également contenue, parfois de manière opaque, dans une variété d'autres

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genres et pratiques. Pendant la période coloniale, des formes de connaissance traditionnellement segmentées et dispersées ont été regroupées dans des débats civiques pour constituer une histoire commune plus globale. Cependant, alors que les comptendus historiques auraient pu subir des pressions politiques ou même refléter des ambitions locales étendues, la présence durable de connaissance historique sous forme de textes utilisés dans la vie de tous les jours indique qu'il persistait néanmoins un sens commun de ce qui était tenu pour vrai au sein de la communauté.

Introduction¹

History, in the sense of the production of a sustained and coherent narrative about past events, is not a universal category of knowledge.² But all groups or societies have rules for the “debatability of the past” which centre on a normative order of discourse about historical events and practices.³ Following this insight, a broad approach to historical production has allowed for the exploration of formerly neglected topics, both historically constituted by and constitutive of the experiences of particular groups and individuals. The growing interest in the study of history as it is remembered, debated, and projected into the future has allowed historians and anthropologists to engage closely with locally specific forms of encounter and authority. Such studies are ideally posited to challenge anthropological and historical master narratives, and they have given voice to at least some of the disparate subaltern groups produced by local and global strictures of power throughout Africa.⁴

¹ This article draws on research conducted for the Starting Researcher Grant “Knowing Each Other: Everyday religious encounters, social identities and tolerance in southwest Nigeria” (Grant agreement no. 283466), founded by the European Research Council (ERC). I am very grateful to HRM *Oba* Dr. Olusino Adesanya, *Oba Àmẹ̀rò, Oba Ìsẹ̀sẹ̀ Àgbáyé, Lẹ̀gùsẹ̀n Odè Ulé*, for discussing an early version of the article with me, and for offering help with spellings and translations. I also thank Karin Barber, Max Bolt, Rebecca Jones, Olukoya Ogen, Benedetta Rossi, Keith Shear, and Kate Skinner for their thoughtful comments and suggestions for the draft article. Finally, I am indebted to two anonymous readers for *History in Africa* for their constructive advice.

² One might of course argue that History has become a global category of understanding in the wake of the globalisation of Western and academic forms of knowledge. But by the nature of its subject, it continues to be shaped by the uneven nature and availability of locally produced sources.

³ Arjun Appadurai, “The Past as a Scarce Resource,” *Man* (New Series) 16-2 (1981), 201-219, 218.

⁴ Elizabeth Tonkin, “The Boundaries of History in Oral Performance,” *History in Africa* 9 (1982), 273-284; Isabel Hofmeyr, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1994); Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2002).

But while all history has to be understood against the social, political, and economic background of its production, it must also be examined in the context of more fundamental discursive processes.⁵ The experiences of individuals and groups cannot be conveyed independently of pre-existing forms of speech, representation, and self-representation.⁶ An exclusive focus on facticity, positionality or power obscures the discursive elements of historical production, even though these may be constitutive of local understandings of what is discussed.⁷ One of the challenges for the extension of a broader understanding of historical production into the precolonial past is that it requires forms of discursive knowledge which have not been systematically explored or which may be beyond recovery.⁸ A separation of historical knowledge from the wider intellectual and practical conventions according to which it was produced is problematic precisely because it treats history as existing independently from those who made it.

Attention to the rules of local historical discourse is particularly important in societies where the conventions of historical production are only partially standardized and freely accessible, and where historical knowledge reflects locally specific norms and modes of argumentation. Such modes of understanding are often shaped and illuminated by genre. For example, Karin Barber has suggested that in precolonial Yoruba society, historical knowledge was likely segregated among different groups.⁹ Historical information was primarily conveyed in narratives called *ìtàn* which belonged to the representatives of important groups. Thus, the *ìtàn* of a town was owned by the town's ruler, who embodied the town. Below that level, *ìtàn* were held by the heads of important descent and residential groups.¹⁰ But beyond *ìtàn*, historical information was also conveyed in other genres. Important historical details were transmitted in divination verses, ritual, and a form of praise poetry called *oriki*, as well as many smaller genres.¹¹

⁵ Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁶ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

⁷ Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (London/Bloomington IN: James Currey/Indiana University Press, 1997), 34.

⁸ Richard Reid, "Past and Presentism: The 'Precolonial' and the Foreshortening of African History," *The Journal of African History* 52-2 (2011), 135-155, 137, 145-151.

⁹ Karin Barber, "I.B. Akinyele and Early Yoruba Print Culture," in: Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola (eds.), *Recasting the Past. History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 31-49.

¹⁰ Karin Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow. Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 153-159.

¹¹ Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 83-97.

Different genres were associated with different social identities, including gender: knowledge of *itàn* tended to be invested in elderly men and *oriki* were usually performed by women. However, the relationship between genres was symbiotic, and many men knew praise poetry, and especially older women were familiar with historical narratives. While older and respected people tended to have more historical knowledge, the fact that individuals of different backgrounds, genders, and capabilities had access to different aspects of historical knowledge reflected an aesthetics of diversity. Reflecting and creating social boundaries, the segmentation of historical knowledge affirmed individuality and identity. At the same time, it offered the potential for substantiation and corroboration, pointing to the fact that in local debates, truth was an important concern.¹²

The introduction of colonial rule altered the views and practices associated with historical production in many African polities. The activities of African intellectuals during the late nineteenth and twentieth century suggest that a re-ordering and re-interpretation of existing categories of knowledge in order to gain a new understanding of the world not only changed the content of historical debate but could also lead to the emergence of new forms of historical argument and representation.¹³ Barber has suggested that in Yoruba society, the local encounter with Western education and forms of historical writing gave rise to the production of written histories in which local intellectuals brought together different aspects of historical knowledge which had previously been separated. Addressing wider audiences through the medium of print, the production of local histories was a civic project which aimed at convening people “around particular projected models of the present and the past.”¹⁴

In this article I argue that Barber’s description of Yoruba historical writing as a new form of historical production is also useful in understanding the real-life historical debates which emerged in many towns and communities in response to the changes associated with colonial rule. Some history books were clearly written in order to influence local debates, but intellectuals who participated in such debates also produced notes, letters, petitions, and other texts, some of which remain in the colonial files. While such texts tended to focus on issues under the jurisdiction of

¹² In his study of Haitian history, Michel Rolph Trouillot speaks of the “pernicious belief (among academic historians) that epistemic validity matters only to Western-educated populations.” See: Michel R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1995).

¹³ Axel Harneit-Sievers (ed.), *A Place in the World. New Local Historiographies from Africa and South-Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola, *Recasting the Past. History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2009); Carola Lentz, “S.W.D.K. Gandah (1927–2001): Intellectual and Historian from Northern Ghana,” *Africa* 82 (2012), 343-355.

¹⁴ Barber, “I.B. Akinyele,” 34.

the colonial administration, they referred to historical facts and understandings that pointed to their authors' knowledge of local genres of historical relevance. As a result, the debates which emerged especially with regard to locally important issues were at least partly shaped by arguments and concerns drawn from formerly segregated aspects of historical knowledge. By bringing together disparate aspects of knowledge, one could argue that the participants of such debates were, like the authors of history books, producing a civic form of historical knowledge that transcended individual points of view.

All the same, there are important limits to this comparison: the debates surrounding local history cannot be read like a Yoruba history book. Written by different authors, the texts produced to influence such debates were diverse. While some letters and petitions appear to have been produced with a clear idea of their most important readers, others seem just to offer facts or background information. And some submissions could almost be read as standalone documents, offering visions for a more enlightened future or a range of ironic comments which nonetheless only become fully intelligible in the context of the debate. Frequently representing radically different points of view, the texts offer an understanding of the most important areas of debate rather than a clear narrative. While most texts imply, directly or indirectly, the existence of a collective audience, they often also illustrate in striking ways how differently their authors imagined their addressees.¹⁵

But despite their multivocality, debates about local history were shaped by the range of practical options available to their participants in the colonial state. In most of Nigeria, the British preference for indirect government privileged historically legitimated rulers, who were appointed to local administrative positions. The influence associated with such posts often offered their holders the possibility to interpret local knowledge in ways that reflected their interests and ambitions. In this way, the administrative logic of the colonial state buttressed Yoruba understandings that town narratives were controlled by their towns' rulers. As this article illustrates, the mutual reinforcement of state and local dispositions towards rulers' control of town histories enabled some individuals to establish official versions of history which diverged in important ways from those which had been widely accepted before.

At first glance, such developments might suggest interpretations focusing on the "invention of tradition."¹⁶ But the production and temporary acquiescence to histories which were primarily produced in response to the state did not mean that historical truth – epistemic validity – was irrelevant to the population. Importantly, alternative historical narratives were most

¹⁵ A detailed analysis of perspectives, styles, and imagined audiences of the correspondences surrounding historically rooted colonial debates is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

convincingly produced through the reinterpretation of existing narratives.¹⁷ It is likely that this process itself was not entirely new: the openness of some narratives to reinterpretation may have enabled groups to form and re-form at a local level in response to pressures created by West Africa's complex migration history.¹⁸ But even so, a close look at local historiography illustrates that the entrenchment of an official narrative did not automatically imply that it would be accepted as genuine at the grassroots.

The argument in this article turns on the debate about the origin of the then ruler, or *oba*, of the small Yoruba town of Ode, now usually referred to as Ode Remo,¹⁹ in southwestern Nigeria during the 1930s and 1940s. Based on a case study of two linked debates, the article explains in what ways local historical knowledge was contained, sometimes opaquely, in a variety of other genres and practices beyond narratives. It suggests that during the colonial period, many individuals evaluated publicly discussed matters on the basis of separately held knowledge, and, on the basis of such an evaluation, offered versions of historical truth which, according to their own reckoning, reflected the experiences of their community as a whole more correctly. In this way, traditionally segmented and distributed forms of knowledge were brought together in civic debates to constitute a more general history.

Shaped both by the forms in which Yoruba historical knowledge existed and by the pressures of the colonial state, local accounts were susceptible to inflection especially in social and political constellations that aligned the interests of the local state and its traditional representatives. In 1937, the *oba* of Ode Remo, *Aláyé Odè* Joseph Adesanya Adeosin, supported the local movement for administrative independence from the area's historical capital of Ijebu-Ode under a local leader, the *Akàrìgbò*. He did this primarily by representing his office's ritual relationship both with Ijebu-Ode and with an earlier local ruler, the *Ńlókú*, in a way that was not widely accepted as correct. Apparently confirming local ambitions for independence, Adeosin's narrative reflected the sympathies of contemporary colonial administrators and the interests of local leaders like himself. It also ensured enduring benefits for the town.

But irrespective of this, *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin's history was unceremoniously overlooked by his townspeople when, in 1948, he was faced with strong local

¹⁷ Robin Law, "Ideologies of Royal Power: The Dissolution and Reconstruction of Political Authority on the 'Slave Coast', 1680-1750," *Africa* 57-3 (1987), 321-344.

¹⁸ Cf. Igor Kopytoff, "The Internal African Frontier: The Making of African Political Culture" in: Igor Kopytoff (ed.), *The African Frontier. The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3-86.

¹⁹ Older sources usually refer to the settlement simply as Ode, Ode Ule, Ode Ile, or Ode town. Abraham lists the settlement as *Odè*, but his tonal marks do not reflect the locally accepted pronunciation, which is *Odè*. See: Roy C. Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba* (London: University of London Press, 1958), 449. The name Ode Remo is documented earlier but seems to have become generally accepted during the latter half of the twentieth century.

opposition which culminated in the resuscitation of the *N'lokú* title. Drawing on different forms of historical knowledge, including ritual, and on everyday genres such as proverbs, songs, and curses as well as personal praise poetry or *oríkì*, local groups and individuals offered a wide range of arguments in favor of the resuscitation of the title. Beyond the material and political interests involved, the strength and emotionality of these arguments also reflected the fact that historical knowledge could not be abstracted from those who held it. Groups and individuals might accept fictitious or misleading versions of history for a range of reasons, including state pressure as well as political or economic advantage. But because access to history was linked to social identity, most people continued to hold historical knowledge that existed independently of any established narratives. When a new debate emerged, individuals would refer to their own knowledge – as if from first principles – in order to participate. This limited the possibilities for cumulative reinterpretation and contributed to an overall sense of what was accepted as historically accurate.

Nonetheless, the distributed nature of historical knowledge also meant that the overall fabric of local history was rather loosely woven. While important facts were confirmed by different narratives and genres, the temporal and causal links between such facts could often only be reconstructed through careful interpretation. Some of the texts explored in this article suggest that their authors were aware of potentially problematic aspects of locating the past too firmly in the present. Like the openness to interpretation of local narratives, the gaps which separated the knowledge contained in different historical genres created the possibility of, and perhaps even the need for, ongoing reassessment.

Ode Remo in Local Relations of Power

The town of Ode Remo is located roughly half-way between the major cities of Lagos and Ibadan. Its existence is not formally documented before the nineteenth century, and written references to its history are largely confined to documents produced after the beginning of colonial rule. Local sources tend to agree that Ode Remo emerged from the coming together of several smaller communities,²⁰ and that the position of its overall ruler, the *Aláyé Odè*, was established by the tenth *Awùjalè*, or ruler, of Ijebu-Ode, the capital of the precolonial Ijebu kingdom. This ruler, also referred to as Obaruwa Muda, is believed to have held power in the sixteenth or seventeenth century,²¹

²⁰ Locally published town histories suggest that many Remo towns include more than one community that has some claim to predating the current settlement.

²¹ Ode Remo historian David O. Epega notes the first year of his reign as 1620 in his *Iwe Itan Ijebu ati Ilu Miran* (Ode Remo: Imole Oluwa Institute, 1934 [1919]), 12. However, a publication originally completed in 1952 by the Ijebu-based historians Olufunmilayo Adebajo and Samuel Adebajo, and later edited by Badejo Oluremi Adebajo, suggests that it was 1520 – see: *Itan Ido Ijebu* (Lagos: John West Publications Limited, 1990 [1952]), chapter 6.

suggesting that in Ode Remo, as in a number of other Yoruba settlements, the creation of the town's *obaship* reflected the political reorganization of the settlement rather than its creation.²²

It is likely that the installation of the *Aláyé Odè* reflected an expansion of Ijebu-Ode's control over the town or the region, and that the town was part of the precolonial Ijebu kingdom at least by the seventeenth century. Under the overall authority of the *Awùjalè*, Ode Remo also belonged to an association of thirty-three Remo towns whose representatives met regularly to agree on matters of local concern.²³ Located along the increasingly important trade route from Lagos to the new warrior city of Ibadan, the Remo towns grew in wealth and population during the nineteenth century, and eventually sought greater autonomy from Ijebu-Ode.

In 1872, several Remo communities joined together to form the settlement of Sagamu under the leadership of a local ruler, the *Akàrígbò*, thus creating a capital and centre for Remo's political ambition. Remo's independence from Ijebu-Ode was further increased after the defeat of Ijebu in 1892, and Sagamu representatives signed a separate treaty with the British in 1894.²⁴ As a result, the Remo towns were administered directly from Lagos Colony rather than from Ijebu-Ode. While this did not mean that all local ties to Ijebu-Ode were cut, many towns tried to assert greater independence from the *Awùjalè*.²⁵

However, in preparation for the introduction of Indirect Rule, most of Remo ceased to be administered from Lagos in 1914, and was incorporated

²² For similar details on other Yoruba communities, cf. Steven A. Akintoye, *A History of the Yoruba People* (Dakar: Amalion Publishing, 2010).

²³ The study of associational and horizontal forms of political organization in Yorubaland is currently less developed than that of more hierarchical structures. Associations of towns existed in several parts of Yorubaland beyond Remo, including other parts of Ijebu and the Egba area. See: Insa Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo and the Making of Remo: The Local Politics of a Nigerian Nationalist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 64-73.

²⁴ The Remo armies did not participate in the Anglo-Ijebu war of 1892, and they were not considered defeated by the British (Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 88-91).

²⁵ In most cases this involved the reduction of tribute payments by those towns which had paid tribute in 1892, and greater independence in decision-making. However, such decisions were shaped by a range of factors. In Ode Remo, tribute payments were stopped but taken up again when the *Ifá* oracle revealed their necessity. The British also limited the success of some attempts. In 1892, after the defeat of Ijebu, a man was sentenced to death and killed in the Remo town of Ikenne, where death sentences had previously been confirmed by Ijebu-Ode. Ijebu-Ode sent out a punitive expedition which destroyed the building where the sentencing had taken place. The then *Akàrígbò* complained about the intervention to the British, but Ijebu-Ode's position was upheld. See: Tunde Oduwobi, *Ijebu under Colonial Rule, 1892-1960. An Administrative and Political Analysis* (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 2004).

into the newly created Ijebu Division (1921: Ijebu Province) by 1918.²⁶ For the Remo towns, this meant a renewed subordination to Ijebu-Ode as the administrative capital, and to the *Awùjalẹ̀* as the paramount ruler. As the Sole Native Authority for Ijebu, the *Awùjalẹ̀*, who had previously received an annual tribute from most – though by no means all – Remo towns, and who had adjudicated capital cases for a lesser number of Remo towns, not only became the area's highest adjudicator but was also given de facto control over all locally raised tax income. And despite the fact that tax income from Remo was significant, the vast majority of this revenue was spent in Ijebu-Ode.

The material and practical disadvantages of rule from Ijebu-Ode for Remo enabled the most influential Remo *oba*, *Akàrígbò* Christopher William Adedoyin, to build up popular support for Remo independence from Ijebu-Ode under his own paramountcy.²⁷ In response to several petitions, the colonial government set up a Commission of Inquiry, headed by Justice Miles Martindale, into the political and administrative relationship between Ijebu and Remo in 1937.

Narrating Ode Remo's Independence from Ijebu-Ode, 1937

The practices of the Martindale Commission were shaped by the praxis of Indirect Rule. Designed to govern, where possible, with the help of existing institutions, the colonial state built its local administration on power holders who were able to claim authority through recourse to history. In southwest Nigeria, the group that was most successful in claiming such authority was that of the traditional rulers,²⁸ or *obas*, of the towns and cities on which the public life of most Yoruba-speakers was centered.²⁹ This provided them with practical advantages. Apart from receiving a state stipend, traditional rulers were usually given control over the collection of tax, local policing, and local Native Courts, which enabled many of them to expand their authority

²⁶ The reorganization of local government took some time, both due to the impact of the First World War on British administrative priorities and in reflection of a protracted crisis in Ijebu-Ode. Several coastal Remo towns, including Ikorodu, continued to be administered from Lagos. See: Oduwobi, *Ijebu under Colonial Rule*, 42-65.

²⁷ This divided opinion both between and within the Remo towns. The Remo towns had, in the past, co-operated as a group of towns in which Ofin and the *Akàrígbò* played a dominant role, but the *Akàrígbò* was widely perceived as a *primus inter pares* rather than a paramount ruler. See: Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 107-119.

²⁸ In this article I refer to all institutions legitimated through recourse to the precolonial past as traditional.

²⁹ In many parts of Yorubaland, the office of the *oba* was open to a range of candidates who had descended from the first *oba*. One of these candidates was chosen by the kingmakers on the basis of his abilities and attributes. As a result of this system, many Yoruba towns had, by the 1930s and 1940s, literate *obas*.

beyond the influence of their historical predecessors. In addition, the control of local colonial institutions provided a base for rulers' powers of interpretation over local cultural practice and history.³⁰

The politicization of town histories by the state meant that these became potentially powerful tools reflecting the ambitions of (royal) individuals and their supporters. In the small town of Ode Remo, town history played an important role in the struggle for greater administrative autonomy from Ijebu-Ode. Called before the commission on 29 September 1937, the then *Aláyé Odè* Joseph Adesanya Adeosin (1929-1960) illuminated the relationship between his present paramount ruler – *Awùjalè* Daniel Adesanya (1933-1959) – and his aspiring paramount ruler – *Akàrígbò* Christopher William Adedoyin (1916-1952) – from the vantage point of his own position in Ode Remo. He explained:³¹

The Alaiye-Ode is from Ile-Ife. Iloku [*Ńlókú*] was my [i.e. the first *Aláyé Odè's*] maternal [great³²] grandfather. He came from Ile-Ife with Akarigbo. Long after this the daughter of the Awujale became the wife of Iloku's grandchild. This woman was long barren and anxious for a child, but Iloku's grandchild had caused her to conceive and bear a male child. When the Awujale, the father of the mother of this child, heard of it he was delighted and asked to see the child and (...) placed a crown on its head. After that the child was taken back to Ode. (...) According to native law and custom, the Awujale is a relative to Iloku because the former gave the latter his daughter in marriage.³³

³⁰ Insa Nolte, "Chieftaincy and the State in Abacha's Nigeria: Kingship, Political Rivalry and Competing Histories in Abeokuta during the 1990s," *Africa* 72-3 (2002), 46-89.

³¹ The transcript notes that the statement was made in Yoruba. No translator is mentioned. Adeosin was a graduate of Wesley College who produced a number of documents in English, often with comments in his own hand. I consider it likely that during cross-examination he also testified in English. The abrupt style of the text is noticeable in many parts of the Martindale Commission's proceedings.

³² The *Ńlókú* cannot be the *Aláyé Odè's* direct maternal grandfather because the *Awùjalè* is the father of his mother. The *Ńlókú* can be the father of the *Aláyé Odè's* father's mother, or possibly an even earlier male ancestor in the father's mother's line.

³³ Remo Forum, *Ijebu Commission of Inquiry between Akarigbo of Remo and Awujale of Ijebu-Ode. Martindale Inquiry Report, 1937 (Volume 1)* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 2008), 194-195. For many years it was difficult for local historians and leaders to get hold of the complete proceedings of the Martindale Commission, which are kept at the National Archives in Ibadan (NAI). In 2008, a group of Remo patriots who called themselves "Remo Forum" sponsored the publication of the documents in three volumes at a Nigerian publisher. These books contain more detail than I was able to obtain at the National Archives. At the same time, and on the basis of the material I was able to acquire independently of this group, I consider the books' content reliable for the purposes of this article.

While the *Aláyé Odè*'s descent from the *Awùjalè* was widely accepted, it was not helpful to the cause of Remo independence, because it was widely interpreted to imply that the *Aláyé Odè* owed allegiance to the *Awùjalè*. It is highly likely that this consideration was the reason why *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin also emphasized the link of his own office to an earlier ruler, the *Ñlokú* of Iraye. As one of the communities which existed on the site of contemporary Ode Remo before the establishment of the *Aláyé Odè*ship, Iraye³⁴ is also widely recognized as one of Remo's oldest settlements.³⁵ In addition, it is widely accepted as likely that the family of the *Aláyé Odè*'s father had links to Iraye.³⁶ Through his descent from the *Ñlokú*, Adeosin argued, the *Aláyé Odè* owed allegiance not to the *Awùjalè* but to the *Akàrígbò*.

But although Adeosin's claim to a privileged link between the *Aláyé Odè* and the *Akàrígbò* was perceived as unconvincing by many Ode Remo citizens, it was not an outright fabrication. Instead it relied on a reinterpretation of some aspects of the town's history which were relatively vague or offered some leeway.³⁷ For example, the shared journey to Remo by the *Ñlokú* and the *Akàrígbò* would usually be interpreted as a relationship between co-travelers, or between a leader and a follower. But in this case Adeosin presented it as a relationship of absolute obligation. Moreover, according to Adeosin, both the *Ñlokú* and the *Awùjalè* were ancestors of the *Aláyé Odè* in the maternal line. In the Remo towns, descent is frequently reckoned both through paternal and maternal lines. However, descent through a female is often considered weaker.³⁸ The ambivalence – and thus openness to interpretation – of female descent is illustrated by the fact that that Adeosin here offered different interpretations of two structurally similar relationships.

The openness to reinterpretation of Ode Remo's narrative is not simply a result of the town's complex settlement history. Most settlements and institutions in Remo, and indeed in Yorubaland, have narratives that include similar narrative gaps or hinges, which can be interpreted in different ways. Building on widely accepted facts, groups and individuals can also offer new visions of the future through novel interpretations of vague links or potentially flexible connections in the existing narratives. As *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin's history redefined relations of power in the manner

³⁴ The Remo pronunciation is Ìgháyè.

³⁵ Local knowledge about the history of Iraye is explored in greater detail below.

³⁶ Not all local historians agree that a descendant of the *Ñlokú* was the father of the *Aláyé Odè*, as claimed here. Some historians suggest that his father was a migrant or a descendant of migrants from the area of the present Kogi state, who settled in Iraye. Interview HRM *oba* Olusino Adekoya, *oba* Àmèrò, *oba* Iṣṣe Agbáyé, Ode Remo, 24 June 2012.

³⁷ I am very grateful to Karin Barber for drawing my attention to this point.

³⁸ Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 62.

avored by local interests, he produced a template for the transformation of the community “disguised as a continuation or restoration of the traditional order.”³⁹

Accepting the narratives put forward by *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin and other supporters of *Akàrígbò* Adedoyin,⁴⁰ the Martindale Commission established Remo as a financially independent District within Ijebu Province in 1938. Remo’s new status benefited almost all Remo *obas*,⁴¹ including the *Aláyé Odè*, because it offered them increased inclusion in and access to the local state, and most importantly control over the tax revenue raised in their own communities. Beyond that, the assertion of independence carried strong undertones of self-realization: up to today, Remo’s independence from Ijebu-Ode continues to be seen as an important achievement by wide sections of the population.

But irrespective of the structural factors in support of this narrative, it has almost entirely disappeared from public awareness. Thus, the *Akàrígbò* has been recognized politically throughout Remo, and in Ode Remo in particular, as the region’s paramount ruler.⁴² Yet despite this political recognition he does not, in any of the histories of Ode Remo published since 1937, appear as the dominant figure in the narrative of the *Aláyé Odè*’s origin. Equally, despite the relative decrease of references to Ijebu-Ode in Remo – and Ode Remo – town histories,⁴³ the *Awùjalẹ* has not disappeared from Ode Remo narratives. The almost complete disappearance of Adeosin’s 1937 history of Ode Remo’s substantiates Robin Law’s suggestion that the apparent confirmation of a particular past by the present is not always enough to establish it as a popularly acknowledged historical fact.⁴⁴

Historical Narratives Are Owned by Groups and Institutions

Colonial perceptions of *obas*’ histories as legitimating their influence were in some ways cognate with local understandings of the relationship between

³⁹ Law, “Ideologies of Royal Power,” 339.

⁴⁰ The Martindale Commission also based its decision on other, more directly political considerations discussed elsewhere. See: Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 114-119.

⁴¹ Despite the overall benefits of this development for Remo, resentment over the *Akàrígbò*’s position played a role in local politics until the 1950s, when an intervention by Obafemi Awolowo produced a political constellation in which the paramountcy of the *Akàrígbò* was widely accepted. See: Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 162-166.

⁴² Since the political settlement of the 1950s, disagreements over the nature and reach of the *Akàrígbò*’s authority have continued to surface within Remo political debates.

⁴³ For a reflection on the changing content of Remo town histories of origin collected at different points in the twentieth century, see Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 36-38.

⁴⁴ Robin Law, “The Heritage of Oduduwa: Traditional History and Political Propaganda among the Yoruba,” *Journal of African History* 14-2 (1973), 207-222, 221.

leadership and history. The histories of many Yoruba settlements focus on the achievements of cultural heroes who set out from the town of Ile-Ife, or from towns which trace their own roots to Ile-Ife, to become the rulers of settlements they founded or re-organized politically. While there are also many exceptions, and even challenges, to the conventional content of such narratives, they tend to imply that communal history is irreversibly linked to urban settlements and their founders. In this way, they offer a template for ideal social relations within and beyond the community.

This understanding is embedded in the use of the Yoruba word for history, *itàn*. Olabiyi Yai explains that *pitàn*, to tell history, can be understood as the production of “a discourse that could constitute the Ariadne’s thread of the human historical labyrinth, history being equated with a maze.”⁴⁵ Thus, when the teller of history de-riddles history, she or he does so by forging an individual path through the puzzle posed by contradictory and confounding explanations. While everything and everybody has *itàn*, Yai also explains that *itàn* evokes, most importantly, the chronological relationships between human beings and their deeds and the geographical dimension through which history is naturally seen as an expansion of individuals and groups beyond their point of origin.⁴⁶ Yai’s elucidation illuminates the centrality of town histories, sometimes more specifically referred to as *itàn ihú*, for the norms that govern the telling and understanding of *itàn*.

So intimately are Yoruba town histories connected to the agency and status of local rulers that outsiders interested in a town’s history are usually expected to speak to the town’s ruler first before making any further enquiries. Barber explains that:

The town’s history is the history of one figure: the “I” who represents the office successively filled by all the present *oba*’s predecessors. (...) All past *obas* are “I” to their successors. The continuity of the royal line, whose importance is thus stressed, is synonymous with the continuity of the life of the town itself.⁴⁷

In this way, *obas*, once installed, really did own their towns’ histories. It was this understanding, as well as the inherent openness to reinterpretation of most narratives, which insulated *Aláyé Odè Adeosin*’s argument somewhat

⁴⁵ The etymological origin of the noun *itàn* is derived from the verb *tàn*, which means to illuminate, enlighten, discern, disentangle. *Ìtàn* is often used with the verb *pa*, which means to split, to hatch, or to solve. See: Olabiyi B. Yai, “In Praise of Metonymy: The Concepts of ‘Tradition’ and ‘Creativity’ in the Transmission of Yoruba Artistry over Time and Space,” in: Rowland Abiodun, Henry J. Drewal and John Pemberton III (eds.), *The Yoruba Artist* (Washington/London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 107-115, 109.

⁴⁶ Yai, “In Praise of Metonymy,” 108.

⁴⁷ Barber, *I Could Speak*, 51.

against the criticism his story attracted.⁴⁸ While the details of this dispute cannot be explored in the context of this article, local opposition was important enough to lead to a cross-examination of Adeosin during his hearing. The opposing lawyer queried his history not only in the light of an existing history book by the Ode Remo-based historian David Onadele Epega, but also in view of the fact that the *Aláyé Odè* had allowed Epega to narrate his own history of Ode Remo publicly. The implication was that as the town's *oba*, Adeosin would not have allowed the public telling of a history he considered false. Here, Adeosin replied: "Each man gives his own history."⁴⁹

Adeosin's comment emphasized the local understanding that histories – *ìtàn* – existed in the plural. In a field of coexisting histories or *ìtàn*, historical knowledge in Yoruba society was widely but unevenly distributed. While the *oba* owned the history of the whole town, other groups and institutions owned histories that explained their own origin and history. Karin Barber explains that in Okuku, as in most Yoruba towns, the most important *ìtàn* were held by the heads of the town's lineages. Located in large compounds where the male lineage members live with their dependants, patrilineages form important social units.⁵⁰ Existing both below the level of town history and as links between different town histories, lineage *ìtàn* focus on the migrations of the lineage ancestors before they settled in the town.

The importance of descent for the social organization in most Yoruba towns has been widely noted,⁵¹ but Barber argues that the boundaries of lineages are often fluid. Social identities are shaped both by descent and shared residence, as well as by common organization and co-operation.⁵² They are also "continually redefined according to the circumstances, giving rise to different 'groups,' differently recruited in different situations."⁵³ Because descent can be reckoned through female as well as male ancestors in Remo, lineage boundaries are even more fluid than in most other parts of Yorubaland. Individuals can mobilize descent through male and female

⁴⁸ Prominent critics of *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin's argument, and of the claim for Remo independence under the *Akàrígbò*'s paramountcy more generally, also included HRM *oba* Samuel Akisanya, the *Odẹmọ* of Isara. For a discussion focusing on the agency of *Odẹmọ* Adesanya and Wole Soyinka's "factional" account of him, see: Insa Nolte, "Cultural Politics and Nationalist History: A Background to Wole Soyinka's *Ìsarà*," in: Toyin Falola (ed.), *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honor of John Peel* (Durham NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 209-232.

⁴⁹ Remo Forum, *Ijebu Commission of Inquiry*, 202.

⁵⁰ Barber, *I Could Speak*, 154-165. Today many citizens of Okuku and other expanding Oyo towns have built more modern houses elsewhere, but all those who can claim to belong to a town by birth must know their lineage's compound there.

⁵¹ Peter C. Lloyd, "The Yoruba Lineage," *Africa* 25-3 (1955), 235-251.

⁵² Barber, *I Could Speak*, 164.

⁵³ Barber, *I Could Speak*, 158.

lines at the same time, and many individuals consider themselves members of more than one group.⁵⁴

In the Remo towns, the social role of lineages is also complemented by institutions based explicitly on shared residence and co-operation.⁵⁵ For example, the migration of population groups is not primarily associated with the leadership of lineage ancestors, and it is often explained as the result of decisions taken by leaders and followers. On arrival in a new town, such groups usually settled in the same area and formed a quarter whose members shared some resources as well as *itàn*. Beyond this, most Remo towns possess *itàn* which are linked to important political institutions, or to deities called *òrìsà*. Here, too, claims to group membership can be mobilized in overlapping ways, and membership of one group does not preclude that of another.

Of course multiple group membership does not mean that individuals are automatically knowledgeable about the histories of their groups: *itàn* are not told to everybody, and especially details which are considered socially explosive or spiritually dangerous are only passed on to trusted listeners.⁵⁶ However, members of any group, whether by descent, residence or initiation, have a strong claim to some knowledge of its *itàn*. By the time an individual attains a degree of seniority in a group, she or he will also have learnt about the group's *itàn* through participation in group activities, as such knowledge is important in a range of matters including marriage negotiations, land use or chieftaincy debates. For this reason, most mature Remo residents are familiar with important aspects of at least their parents' lineages' *itàn*, and many also know at least the *itàn* relating to the towns or quarters of their parents.

Because *itàn* are central to the constitution of groups whose membership is not exclusive, they also constitute a form of knowledge that reflects individuality. As individual descent can be reckoned through male and female lines, every individual has potential access to a unique constellation of historical knowledge, only shared in the same manner by full siblings. These offer her or him an individual vantage point on the social fabric of local historical knowledge. But only those with significant personal or material resources can maintain the kind of membership that will eventually allow them to know the *itàn* of a wide range of groups in detail. Access to *itàn* reflects active social participation and status, as well as more general considerations of trust.

⁵⁴ I hope to offer a more detailed exploration of the relationship between *itàn* and the constitution of social groups in a separate publication.

⁵⁵ Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 32-64.

⁵⁶ For a short discussion of similar practices in early twentieth-century Asante, see: Tom McCaskie, "Local Knowledge: An Akuapem Twi History of Asante," *History in Africa* 38 (2011), 169-192, 184.

Returning to Adeosin's assertion that "each man gives his own history," it is therefore unlikely that Adeosin meant to imply that everybody could offer historical insights of the same weight. But by alluding to the fact that access to history also reflected individual qualities, the *Aláyé Odè* reminded his audience, insofar as it was knowledgeable, that historical knowledge reflected personal achievement, esteem, and success. He had no reason to defer to Epega. Like many Remo *obas*, Adeosin was a well-educated man.⁵⁷ As an alumnus of Wesley College and a former high school teacher,⁵⁸ he was at least as well educated as Epega, who was a former tailor and ran a private school and a small publishing business. His statement implied that while Epega had acquired historical knowledge beyond the realm of his family links, he might not have been given all relevant details, or he might have misunderstood them, for he still held an overall lower status than his *oba*. For this reason, Adeosin's comment was at best a grudging recognition of Epega's historical views, and more likely a dismissal.

Of course Adeosin's statement also asserted his personal right to the history he had submitted. By emphasizing the personal, his statement points to the ways in which the ownership of historical narratives could impact on the representation of historical fact. Because the dynastic histories of *obas* belonged to individuals who also had personal histories, different types of histories could sometimes be conflated. Thus Adeosin's insistence on the *Aláyé Odè*'s descent from the *Ńlokú* of Iraye resonated with some people because his own maternal family hailed from Iraye.⁵⁹ If Adeosin, the individual person, had descended from the *Ńlokú*, then the *Aláyé Odè* had, at least in his incarnation by Adeosin, also descended from the *Ńlokú*.

But if the boundaries between personal history and the *oba*'s history were not always clear, the merging of such histories was not necessarily driven by the exigencies of the personal. The history of the royal persona could equally explain Adeosin's narrative. In the early 1860s, Ode Remo and some of its neighboring towns had tried, unsuccessfully, to throw off Ijebu-Ode's control. While preparations for war were made in Ode, the then *Aláyé Odè* went to see the *Awùjalè* in Ijebu-Ode, ostensibly in the hope of negotiating an agreement. However, his townspeople saw his visit as a display of allegiance to the *Awùjalè*, and on his return they killed him for

⁵⁷ Because of the acceptability of descent through a female in the selection of an *oba*, it is possible that Remo *obas* are chosen from a wider range of potential candidates than elsewhere. However, this does not apply to all southern Yoruba communities towns in which descent through a female is acceptable. There are many Ijebu towns where access to the throne is narrowed by other factors.

⁵⁸ Before his installation, Adeosin taught at Ode Remo Methodist High School.

⁵⁹ In his 1937 statement, *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin twice referred to the fact that his historical knowledge was derived primarily from his mother (Remo Forum, *Ijebu Commission of Inquiry*, 198,201). Adeosin also built his Ode Remo house on Iraye land, on a plot now situated behind the town hall of Ode Remo.

this disloyalty to the town.⁶⁰ Given *Aláyé Odè Adeosin's* awareness that loyalty to Ijebu-Ode had cost the *Aláyé Odè* – in the person of a predecessor – his life once, he may have given a history that reflected his townspeople's economic and political interests also in order not to repeat a mistake.

Finally, Adeosin's assertion that everyone has their own history also points to the limits of royal control. It suggests that *obas*, rather than being the sole owners of all history, simply hold a privileged role in the narration of those *ìtàn* in which they play the main role. Thus, while one could argue that in Yoruba town histories, the history and destiny of towns appeared to be generalized by the actions of their *obas*,⁶¹ *obas* did not preside over the centralization of all locally relevant historical knowledge.

Expert Knowledge and *Ifá* Divination

Beyond the segmentation of historical knowledge in descent and residential groups, historical knowledge among the Yoruba is also divided in another, perhaps more fundamental way: by genre. Thus, while *ìtàn* is translated as "history" (and vice versa), not all historical knowledge is contained in the narratives described as *ìtàn*. Other oral genres contain important historical information, albeit often in non-narrative or only partially narrative textual arrangements, which offer different perspectives and understandings of the world.

One of the most widely respected historical genres among the Yoruba is *Ifá* divination. Based on the premise that all present developments have roots and precedents in the past, *Ifá* diviners and their clients understand that the knowledge of these past events can offer guidance in the present.⁶² Drawing on a complex and detailed corpus of practices, narratives, songs, and sacrifices anchored in past divinations, the *Ifá* corpus contains a vast amount of detailed historical information about settlements, institutions, and deities. While many *ìtàn* and other texts included in the *Ifá* corpus are popularly known, *Ifá* practice relies on specialist knowledge and practice. It is performed by carefully trained and initiated professionals called *babaláwo* or, less frequently, *iyaláwo*.⁶³

⁶⁰ Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 79-81.

⁶¹ Cf. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), xi.

⁶² William R. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Wande Abimbola, *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976); K. Noel Amherd, *Reciting Ifá. Difference, Heterogeneity, and Identity* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2010).

⁶³ Translation: Father (or mother) of the secret. Another name for female *Ifá* diviners is *iyanífá*, or "mother of *Ifá*." In some Yoruba-speaking communities, women are not allowed to become *Ifá* diviners, but while there are some restrictions on women's practices, this is not the case in Remo. Interview with Mrs. Bose Abatan, 22 August 2002.

Those able to undergo the relevant training to become *Ifá* diviners attain important historical knowledge and develop a professional – ideally detached – view of the repercussions of past events through the ages. As a result, *Ifá* is often understood as a repository of historical truth. This was certainly an understanding shared by David Onadele Epega, the *Aláyé Odè*'s most vocal critic in 1937. In a book on Ijebu history, Epega explained:

Above all, it is for these reasons that I learnt *Ifá*. (...) All the things that have been done in the past are in it; we are certain that the historians of our land who did not learn *Ifá* could not have narrated the history of our land [accurately].⁶⁴

Indeed, the wealth of historical information accessible through *Ifá* makes a detailed discussion of its information on Ode Remo and Iraye possible, even though this remains beyond the scope of this article.⁶⁵ Because *Ifá* divination requires specialist training, its knowledge is not shared in equal measure in the general population. However, *Ifá* diviners are called upon for a range of different purposes, including births, deaths, and marriages, as well as to learn about the dangers and possibilities inherent in new ventures, enterprises or journeys. In Remo, *Ifá* continues to be consulted today by all sections of the population, and it is very likely that this was also the case in the 1930s and 1940s.⁶⁶

Most people's knowledge about *Ifá* verses in the colonial period would have been, as it is today, limited to basics. However, among such basics is the knowledge that information about the foundation of a town is usually contained in a distinct part of the *Ifá* corpus. And indeed, the foundation of Iraye is discussed in different *Ifá* verses from those illuminating the origin of Ode section of the settlement of Ode Remo, which is most closely associated with the *Aláyé Odè*. The foundation of Ode is discussed in the section *Òkànrànsodè*, or the *Odù Òkànràn Ogbè*, while the creation of Iraye is in the section *Òntègbó*, contained in *Odù Ìrètè Ògúndá*.⁶⁷ Thus

⁶⁴ Epega, *Iwe Itan Ijebu ati Ilu Miran*, 3. This is a translation of the original Yoruba text: "Ju gbogbo re lo mo tori nkon wonyi nko Ifa. (...) Ohun gbogbo ti a ti se koja wa ninu re; o da wa loju pe a won opiton ile wa ti ko ko Ifa ko ni le so iton ile wa gege bi o ti ye."

⁶⁵ In-depth knowledge of *Ifá* has been mobilised by local historians to support particular details in other historical disputes. While I am not aware of any detailed study of *Ifá* verses pertaining to Iraye, several versions of verses relating to Ode Remo are discussed by Amherd, *Reciting Ifá*, 245-261, especially 246-248.

⁶⁶ David Onadele Epega himself was both an *Ifá* diviner and a leader of the local Anglican (later African) Church in Ode Remo.

⁶⁷ Unlike in many Yoruba town histories, the founders of both settlements are not clearly identified as their later rulers. Thus, Iraye was founded by Ifagbile, while Ode was founded by Olode, which simply means "the owner of Ode."

even a rudimentary knowledge of *Ifá* would have confirmed to most Ode Remo citizens that the two sections of the town were historically separate settlements with, by implication, different *obas* and dissimilar *itàn*.

Testing *Aláyé Odè Adeosin's* Claim to Descent from the *Ñlokú*, 1948

Like many Remo *obas* during Indirect Rule, *Aláyé Odè Adeosin* made use of his increased access to, and control of, the local administration in order to entrench himself politically and economically. Adeosin not only tried to monopolize the income from town land, but he also sought to establish sole control over more traditional sources of revenue, such as burial fees. This process was particularly controversial in Ode Remo because there were many leaders of town quarters or descent groups who had in the past shared such income.⁶⁸ But discontent with *Aláyé Odè Adeosin* was also colored by religious competition. As Western education had become an important factor for individual and social achievement under colonial rule, many Remo Muslims aspired to closing the educational gap.⁶⁹ While the local *Ansar-ud-deen* association offered to support the building of a local Muslim school, it expected the community to provide the land and raise part of the costs.⁷⁰ But, having tightened his control of communal land surrounding Ode Remo, *Aláyé Odè Adeosin* insisted that the Muslim community should pay for any land it acquired.

One of those who felt unhappy with this development was Salawu Adeboga, a descendant of the family of the *Ñlokú* of Iraye. With some encouragement from *Akàrìgbò Adedoyin*,⁷¹ Adeboga revived the throne of

⁶⁸ National Archives Ibadan (NAI), Ijeprof 4/36, File No. 94 “Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy,” Petition in re Nloku Chieftaincy and Demarcation of [sic], 4 Oct 1948 and Petition for Official Recognition of *Oba Nloku* as the Head of Iraye, Imosan, and Igodo Quarter Peoples of Ode Remo in Ijebu Remo Division, 7 May 1953.

⁶⁹ Christian schools frequently insisted that non-Christians converted before admission or charged Muslim and traditionalist students much higher fees than Christians. However, it is difficult to assess how salient the religious divide was for everyday interpersonal relations. Thus the secretary of the *Ansar-ud-deen* School Building Committee, Jacob Adebayo Ogunjimi Shittu Adekoya, was originally a Muslim, but had by this time converted to Christianity. Interview with HRM *Oba* Olusino Adekoya, *Oba Àmẹ̀rọ̀, Oba Ìṣẹ̀ṣe Àgbáyé*, Ode Remo, 8 December 2012.

⁷⁰ Stefan Reichmuth, “Education and the Growth of Religious Associations among Yoruba Muslims: The Ansar-Ud-Deen Society of Nigeria,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 26-4 (1996), 365-405.

⁷¹ I was unable to reconstruct the reasons for *Akàrìgbò Adedoyin's* support of Iraye in detail. It is likely that his support for Adeboga reflected concern over the political loyalty of *Aláyé Odè Adeosin* as well as his own maternal family ties. As a young man, Adedoyin helped his mother, a farmer and trader in farm produce, who operated from her family's base in the settlement of Etun-Iraye, located south of Sagamu. See: Atinuke A. Joshua, “A Biography of Christopher William Adedoyin II, The Akarigbo of Ijebu-Remo (1916-1952),” unpublished BA dissertation (Ago Iwoye, Ogun State University, 1989), 14-15. This settlement is considered an off-shoot of the Iraye discussed in this article.

Iraye, which had been vacant since the last *Ńlokú* had died in exile, most likely over a century earlier.⁷² Adeboga was crowned as the *Ńlokú* of Iraye in 1948. Once installed as the *Ńlokú*, Adeboga demanded a wider distribution of burial fees and other income in town. A Muslim himself, Adeboga also gave a plot of land in Iraye, suitable for the building of a school, to the Muslim community.⁷³ In this way, Adeboga mobilized aspects of local history which centered on an alternative culture hero, the *Ńlokú*, to become the figurehead of a heterogeneous group of local malcontents.

Adeboga's claim may, at least in part, reflect the fact that the *Aláyé Odè* had confirmed the existence of the *Ńlokú*ship in court ten years earlier. Thus, Adeboga argued that:

In the olden days, Nloku was the Senior Chief in Ode Remo; even the present Alaiye-Ode testified to this facts [sic] at the Remo Enquiry. (...) Nloku is the head of Eluku cults in Ijebu Remo as a whole.⁷⁴

But although Adeboga referred to the Martindale Commission of Inquiry to legitimate his claim to seniority, he did not confirm that the *Ńlokú* was an ancestor of the *Aláyé Odè*, even though this might have established his pre-eminence over the *Aláyé Odè*. By justifying his claim through reference to the deity *Èlúkú*⁷⁵ and his traditional duties in Ode Remo and Ijebu Remo, Adeboga instead linked his authority to ritual practices associated with his office. The deity *Èlúkú* is closely associated with Iraye in the sense that it is widely believed that its main shrine is located in Iraye and that all other *Èlúkú* in southwest Nigeria have their home there. Associated with the execution of criminals, and especially murderers, *Èlúkú* also plays an important part in some burials.

⁷² After a quarrel with his subjects, the last *Ńlokú* had gone to live in the Remo town of Ilisan, where he eventually joined his ancestors. After this incident, no new *Ńlokú* was installed until 1948. Interview with HRM *Ọba* Samuel Adesanya, the *Ńlokú* of Iraye, 9 March 1998. In the early twentieth century, Dennett refers to the recent installation of a *Ńlokú* of Iraye, but it is likely that this information relates to a different settlement also called Iraye. See: Richard Edward Dennett, *Nigerian Studies or the Religious and Political System of the Yoruba* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), 55.

⁷³ The land which was acquired by the Muslim community for the school has since been partly built upon.

⁷⁴ NAI, Ijeprof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Nloku S. Adeboga to the Assistant District Officer, 2 February 1951.

⁷⁵ Abraham lists the following spellings: *Àlukú*, *Èlukú*, and *Èlukú*, which he describes as "a type of *Egúngún*," which is an ancestral masquerade: Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*, 53, 159, 187. The Remo pronunciation is *Èlúkú*, and while there is some variation in the pronunciation, *Àlukú* is not known. I have been told that there are categories of *Egúngún* called *Èlukú* in some northern Yoruba communities, but in Remo, *Èlukú* is most emphatically a different category of masked spirit than *Egúngún*.

In response to Adeboga's claims, Adeosin's supporters argued that the *Aláyé Odè* and the *Ńlókú* did "not belong to the same stock."⁷⁶ This statement contradicted Adeosin's earlier claim that the origin of the *Aláyé Odè* could be traced to the *Ńlókú*, and that this meant that he owed allegiance to the *Akàrígbò*. Instead the *Aláyé Odè*'s supporters referred to arguments based in local practice. They explained:

As both [the *Aláyé Odè* and the *Ńlókú*] do not (...) ever run any administration together over a century [sic], comparison will be odious.⁷⁷

As neither of the claimants involved in this dispute built their argument on the earlier assertions about the *Aláyé Odè*'s descent from the *Ńlókú*, it appears as if the relationship between the *Aláyé Odè* and the *Ńlókú* which had been officially accepted in 1937 was simply ignored. Perhaps to avoid a genealogical debate, both protagonists based their claims on local practice. But the fact that they appealed primarily to knowledge about how things had been done in Ode Remo in the past also suggests that this dispute was directed at a different audience.

In 1937, the narrative offered to the Martindale Commission had been aimed primarily at convincing the colonial administration of Remo's right to independence. While the public nature of the Inquiry meant that the debate could be followed by local leaders and intellectuals, some of whom – like Epega – engaged with it, evidence of popular discontent in Ode Remo did not make a significant impact. This was partly because the local opposition was mainly limited to Ode Remo and its northern neighbors and did not reflect the views of the majority of Remo citizens. But official sympathy for Remo independence was noticeable even before the Commission was set up because it resonated with contemporary views on colonial administration as well as other concerns.⁷⁸ In this constellation, *obas* with potentially problematic histories, such as the *Aláyé Odè*, could either insist on swimming against the tide or offer a compliant narrative.⁷⁹

In contrast, the colonial administration had no particular interest in the proper roles of the *Ńlókú* and *Aláyé Odè* beyond avoiding discontent. Existing separately from the larger political, legal, and administrative

⁷⁶ NAI, Ijeprof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Answers to a Questionnaire on Nloku of Iraye by GBS Odunlami, 29 January 1951.

⁷⁷ NAI, Ijeprof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Answers to a Questionnaire on Nloku of Iraye by GBS Odunlami, 29 January 1951.

⁷⁸ These included legal considerations about the details of Britain's extension of power into Ijebu and Remo between 1892 and 1894. See: Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 116-117.

⁷⁹ It is interesting that Adeosin confirmed his claim to Ode Remo's history at one stage by stating: "I want to get away from the domination of Ijebu-Ode." See: Remo Forum, *Ijebu Commission of Inquiry*, 203.

concerns of the local state, and confined to the town of Ode Remo itself, the final decision in this case would likely reflect what local administrators perceived as public opinion. While the *Akàrígbò*'s sympathy for the *Ńlókú* meant that the case extended beyond Ode Remo, it would have been impossible to resuscitate the *Ńlókú* title against the will of both Ode Remo's *oba* and the majority of its citizens. As a result, all protagonists in this matter were aware that they needed popular support. In order to make their cases, both sides appealed to people's knowledge of the past, and both parties appealed to aspects of historical knowledge that were more widely known than *ùtàn*.

Given the segmentation of local historical knowledge, these appeals involved a reinterpretation of different historical texts and practices in line with notions of history thought to be intelligible to colonial officers. While the aim of this reinterpretation was primarily administrative and political, it had to take account of the knowledge held by different and diverse groups in the town, and it needed to take into account the kind of historical knowledge that could reflect the town as a whole. In an extension of John Peel's notion of "cultural work,"⁸⁰ coined to capture the intellectual efforts that contributed to the emergence of Yoruba nationalism, one might consider this project as historical work.⁸¹

Ritual and Precedent as a Historical Resource

Ńlókú Adeboga's claim to ritual prominence was at least partly based on his ownership of the *òrìṣà*, or deity, *Èlúkú*.⁸² This reference implies that knowledge about the *Ńlókú*'s role in the celebration and worship of *Èlúkú* was so widely distributed that it could not be disputed, and it appears to point first to the importance of ritual as a genre of historical knowledge. Indeed, the ritual surrounding *Èlúkú* supports important aspects of Adeboga's claim. Thus, *Èlúkú* is closely linked to the more widely known Ijebu and Remo deity *Agemọ*, whose crown is a powerful symbol of authority in Ijebu and Remo.⁸³ The fact that Ode Remo does not have its own *Agemọ* suggests other aspects of Iraye's ritual eminence.⁸⁴ During the annual *Èlúkú* festival,

⁸⁰ John D.Y. Peel, "The Cultural Work of Yoruba Ethnogenesis," in: Elizabeth Tonkin, Maryon McDonald and Malcolm Chapman (eds.), *History and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1989), 198-215.

⁸¹ The historical debates in Ode Remo illustrate that in such historical work, history and social practice were as inseparably interwoven as in the "cultural work" of the Yoruba literary elite which Peel discusses.

⁸² The title *Ńlókú* is often explained in local etymology as a shortened version of *Onílúkú*, or "owner of *Èlúkú*."

⁸³ In some Ijebu and Remo narratives as well as in the *Odù Ifá Idígbení*, *Agemọ* is described as an authority that preceded *obaship*.

⁸⁴ In the past, the settlement of Ode possessed an *Agemọ*. However, according to sources from Ode Remo the deity was lost during an expedition near the present site of Ikenne. An *Agemọ Odè* is now owned by the town of Ikenne.

the *òrìṣà* enters the town gates at midnight, and the town is declared to belong to *Èlúkú*.⁸⁵ Thus the celebration of *Èlúkú* is also a celebration of its ability to suspend, if only temporarily, other forms of authority in the town.

Èlúkú's temporary suspension of the *Aláyé Odè*'s control of the town can be understood as a ritual enactment of historical events, or a form of "history from below," in which *Èlúkú* emphasizes an ancient form of authority which is normally submerged. In turn, the *Aláyé Odè* appears as the descendant of a conqueror who came into an established community from the outside, and who, in remembrance and acknowledgement of the powers which predated him in the locality, ritually submits to this earlier authority. Other festivals in Ijebu and Remo, including the famous *Agemo* festival in Ijebu-Ode, similarly represent the *oba* as an outsider who recognizes earlier forces, prompting Oyinade Ogunba to argue that the deities represented in such festivals stand for the communities which existed in the area before the introduction of *obaship* to Ijebu and Remo.⁸⁶ In this way, an analysis of ritual performance might confirm local historical knowledge.⁸⁷

But despite its appealing neatness, a straightforward interpretation of ritual as a re-enactment of historical fact is flawed on several levels. Most importantly perhaps, it overestimates the stability of performance.⁸⁸ Even a cursory look at the colonial files points to the suppression of a number of ritual practices and festivals considered offensive by the colonial state.⁸⁹ Other festivals have undergone changes because participants altered the roles they played.⁹⁰ But in addition, the inferred meaning of ritual action is often slippery. As Andrew Apter's study of secret ritual knowledge in Aiyede illustrates,⁹¹ different social groups may hold contradictory views of what happens during a performance. Performances which might be understood as re-enacting historical events by some observers may be perceived as illustrating spiritual truths by others.

⁸⁵ *The Nigerian Chronicle*, 28 May 1909, "Burial Customs in the Yoruba Country. III.-Eluku or Spirit Worship. (Among the Jebus [Ijebus])," 4-5.

⁸⁶ Oyinade Ogunba, "Ritual Drama of the Ijebu People. A Study of Indigenous Festivals," PhD dissertation, University of Ibadan (Ibadan, 1967).

⁸⁷ Cf. Yomi Akinyeye, "Iden Festival: Historical Reconstruction from Ceremonial Reenactment," in: Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (eds.), *Oriṣa. Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), 87-102.

⁸⁸ John D.Y. Peel, "Making History: The Past in the Ijesha Present," *MAN* 19-1 (1984), 111-132, 111.

⁸⁹ This is well documented for Ijebu and Remo, where the celebration of some deities, including *Orò* and *Ṣòpònná*, was limited or prohibited. NAI, Ijeprofile. 1, File No. 775 "Festivals in Ijebu Province - Oro, Agemo, Sabagaba etc."

⁹⁰ Margaret T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual. Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 113-134.

⁹¹ Andrew Apter, *Black Critics and Kings. The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

In this particular case, the *Aláyé Odè*'s submission that he had not shared an administration with the *Ńlókú* for a century raised another point. Given that there had not been a *Ńlókú* for a long time, it is highly unlikely that many of Ode Remo's citizens held detailed historical knowledge about the deity *Èlúkú* or the town of Iraye due to any direct encounter with an actual *Ńlókú*. Also, it is difficult to establish how often the festival of *Èlúkú* was actually held in Ode Remo before 1948.⁹² Moreover, in the absence of a *Ńlókú*, the *Olúmalè*, or chief priest of Iraye's *Èlúkú* cult, had taken on important aspects of the *Ńlókú*'s role, and it is not clear to what degree this transformed local practices.⁹³ Furthermore, given the high rates of conversion to Islam and Christianity by the late colonial period, it is possible that some monotheists refused to attend the *Èlúkú* festival.⁹⁴ And finally, *Èlúkú* is a deity associated with a strong degree of concealment, and it is unlikely that its ritual activities were clearly visible or audible to a wide range of observers during the 1930s and 1940s.⁹⁵

In conclusion, despite its importance for historical knowledge, ritual, like *Ifá* divination, is likely to have had limited influence on popular views because of the instability of performance and the importance of concealed knowledge. But even so, the amount of correspondence in the relevant colonial files suggests that a significant number of groups and individuals strongly supported *Ńlókú* Adeboga's claims, often without any direct material benefit to themselves. The following sections of this article suggest that this support drew strongly on historical knowledge derived from other historical genres which were a more integral part of everyday life.

Historical Knowledge in *Itàn Èlúkú* and Other Genres of Everyday Life

One of the issues most frequently raised in the early correspondence about this case is the payment of death duties, or *owo ìgbó*,⁹⁶ which were due to the town's *oba* on the death of a townsman. By the early twentieth century, the *Olúmalè*, who had also represented the *Ńlókú* in *Èlúkú* ritual,

⁹² While *Èlúkú* has been celebrated in recent years in Ode Remo, contemporary practice suggests that such festivals sometimes go through long fallow periods.

⁹³ In Remo, the *Olúmalè* is normally the head of the *Orò* association, which is linked to the deity *Orò*. Iraye has two *Olúmalè* (one for *Orò* and one for *Èlúkú*). In this article I only refer to the *Olúmalè* of *Èlúkú*. For a detailed discussion of *Orò* in Ijebu and Remo, see: Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 45-50.

⁹⁴ Recent evidence suggests however that significant numbers of local Muslims and Christians continued to participate in *Èlúkú* and other festivals.

⁹⁵ Only very few aspects of the ritual reversal of roles between the *Aláyé Odè* and *Èlúkú* or the *Ńlókú* are open to a general audience today.

⁹⁶ The Remo pronunciation is *ogho ùgbó*.

had been included in the town's decision-making on behalf of Iraye.⁹⁷ He had also received a share of local death tolls, but this practice had come to an end under *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin. When the Ijebu Remo Native Authority, with the support of the Resident, decided in 1948 that the amount collected by the *Aláyé Odè* should be shared 2:1 with the *Ńlókú*, *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin refused to comply.⁹⁸ While this refusal did not affect Ode Remo's citizens directly, it is very likely that the strong public interest in ensuring that the money was shared reflected locally held knowledge about the deity *Èlúkú* and, by extension, the *Ńlókú*.⁹⁹ Thanks to a detailed description of *Èlúkú* in the *Nigerian Chronicle* of 1909, which I was able to compare and discuss with knowledgeable Ode Remo citizens, it is possible to point to a range of genres with which Ode Remo citizens are likely to have been familiar during the 1930s and 1940s. Many of these textual forms were part of peoples' everyday lives and pointed to, or played on, the close relationship between historical knowledge and social boundaries.

As explained above, an *oba's* ownership of his town's *itàn* both reflected and constituted his office. However, as other groups owned other *itàn*, the royal control of the town's history did not mean the automatic subjugation of other historical knowledge to the *oba's* master narrative. As in other towns with more than one community based on residence, the history of Iraye existed separately from that of Ode Remo. There was general agreement that Iraye's presence predated the establishment of Ode Remo. Local historian Epega explained that when the *Aláyé Odè* title was set up, there were already some people and their rulers in place, one of whom was the *Ńlókú*.¹⁰⁰ The early presence of the *Ńlókú* in the region has also been confirmed in writing by other Ode Remo historians. Thus Ode Remo's Chief Amos Osinfade, one of the town's most important traditional title-holders, noted that, "it must be noted that the Nloku of Iraye (...) first settled in the area."¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Examples for this can be found in the colonial files. Even in 1937, when Adeosin had already been installed, the *Obúmalè* of Iraye signed a Letter by the *Aláyé Odè* and others to the Resident, Ijebu Province. NAI, Ijeprof 4, File No. J 1416 "Dipeolu, Ex-Alaye-Ode, 1937-38," Alaye Ode and others to the Resident Ijebu Province, 4 April 1937.

⁹⁸ NAI, Ijeprof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Native Authority Office to Alaiye Ode, Nloku, others, 4 December 1949.

⁹⁹ Since the mid-1990s, death duties have been divided equally between the *obas* in Ode Remo. Interview with HRM *Oba* Sunday Olufunso Adeolu, the *Aláyé Odè* of Ode Remo, 22 December 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Epega, *Iwe Itan Ijebu ati Ilu Miran*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Chief Osinfade was the *Oláwo*, or head, of Ode Remo's *Osùgbó*, which is an important traditional institution of the town. See: Amos Osinfade, "Short History of Ode Remo," unpublished manuscript (1994).

The early settlement of Iraye in Remo is also mentioned in narratives emanating from other towns, and it was confirmed to me in several interviews.¹⁰² Iraye's early presence in Remo is also asserted in a printed town history from Ofin, the *Akàrígbò's* town.¹⁰³ While not all local narratives suggest that the founders of Iraye travelled with the *Akàrígbò* from Ife, the town's early presence and ritual importance in Remo is also confirmed in the histories of other towns in Remo and even beyond.¹⁰⁴

However, like the *itàn* owned by the *Aláyé Odè*, the *itàn* belonging to the *Ñlokú* contains many loose links which can be interpreted in different ways, leading to potentially very different versions of Iraye's history. Iraye's settlement history centers on the migration of the powerful man Fagbile, an *Ifá* diviner,¹⁰⁵ from the Iraye section of Ife to Iraye in Remo. The current *Ñlokú* of Iraye explained to me that Fagbile was also the first *Ñlokú* of the town, and that he migrated from the town currently known as Ile-Ife.¹⁰⁶ However, not all town narratives identify Fagbile clearly as the first *Ñlokú*.¹⁰⁷ Also, while historians confirm that there was an Iraye community in early Ile-Ife,¹⁰⁸ some Remo historians suggest that Iraye's founders came from a town called Ife Oodaye, the exact location of which is not known.¹⁰⁹ It is however widely agreed that

¹⁰² This included an interview with a late *Oba* Onadeko of Isara, a town to the north of Ode Remo which shares a boundary with Iraye. In this interview, *Oba* Onadeko confirmed Iraye's early settlement despite the fact that Isara has long been engaged in an ongoing dispute over land with Iraye, in which Iraye's early presence might be taken to confirm its land claims. Interview with HRM *Oba* Idowu Onadeko, the *Odẹmọ* of Isara, 13 March 1998.

¹⁰³ Yomi Mamora, *Born to Rule: The biography of Oba Michael Adeniyi Sonariwo Erinjugbo II, Akarigbo of Remoland* (Ibadan: Famlod Books, 1991), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Prince J.O. Awopeju, *Outline History of Iperu* (Lagos: Akesan Iperu Club, 1979), 109; Olusegun A. Oduye, "Aiyeye in the Nineteenth Century: A Study in Political Integration," Ogun State University, (Ago Iwoye, unpublished BA dissertation 1987), 8; Chief O. Ayodele, *History of Remo Thirty-Three Traditional Towns (Remo Metalelogbon)* (Sagamu: Olu Ayodele Commercial Enterprises, 2008), 7, 77-81.

¹⁰⁵ This profession is also revealed by the name Fagbile.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with HRM *Oba* Samuel Olatunji Kalejaiye, the *Ñlokú* of Iraye, 24 August 2012.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Ayodele, *History of Remo*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Abiodun Adediran, "The Early Beginnings of the Ife State" in: I.A. Akinjogbin (ed.), *The Cradle of a Race. Ife from the Beginning to 1980* (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications, 1992), 77-95, 80.

¹⁰⁹ It is not clear where Ife Oodaye (Ifè Oòdáyé) was located, though some suggest that it lay east of Ile-Ife. Ife Oodaye is often said to have existed before Ile-Ife, which was only one of its off-shoots.

as a result of outward migration, Iraye migrants created several settlements called Iraye.¹¹⁰

Beyond confirming Iraye's history of migration through knowledge held elsewhere, the segmentation of historical knowledge by descent and residence had important implications for the way in which identity was linked to historical knowledge about the deity *Èlúkú*. Unlike the town history of Ode Remo, the history of the *Èlúkú* did not belong to the *Aláyé Ode* but to the *Ñlokú*, the leaders of the *Èlúkú* cult, and of course to all those who were descendants of *Èlúkú*. Thus, the proper owners of *Èlúkú* might know the following story about the Iraye section of Ife, from where Iraye migrated to Remo:

One day, a shaggy-haired stranger came to this Iraye and demanded entry to the town. Upon standing up to a challenge by the town's gate man, he was taken to the local shrine. Once the stranger was there, he thrice performed a particular motion backwards forwards, and then took his cutlass to cleave into two the piece of stone which stood before him. The stranger then revealed that he was an ancestral spirit who had come to Iraye to punish crime and to avenge the wanton killing of his descendants.¹¹¹

By constituting *Èlúkú* as an ancestral spirit from the beginning, this narrative points to the importance of descent in the ownership of both the deity and its history. The importance of descent is thus both elaborated in the narrative about the origin of *Èlúkú* and in the ownership of this knowledge: only those who can claim the deity as an ancestor can suitably hold knowledge about it. Other narratives further outline restrictions of ownership and knowledge about *Èlúkú*. Such stories explain why women are usually barred from important aspects of its practice, and why some aspects of worship and propitiation are only open to those adequately prepared for, or initiated to, such activities. Limiting access by descent as well as by gender and depth of engagement, the knowledge of *Èlúkú*'s history not only conveys information about the origin and remit of the deity, but it also

¹¹⁰ Apart from Ijebu and Remo, I have been told that such settlements are located in the Yagba, Ekiti and Benin areas. Adediran also refers to an Iraye that was situated south-west of Ile-Ife, which was destroyed in the Owu war, most likely during the 1820s. See: Abiodun Adediran, "Government and Administration of Ife in pre-Colonial Times" in: I.A. Akinjogbin (ed.), *The Cradle of a Race. Ife from the Beginning to 1980* (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications, 1992), 287-304, 294. I have been assured in Remo that the rulers of these settlements would confirm Iraye's migration history, but I have not verified this claim.

¹¹¹ There are other versions of this *itàn*, but the above is narrated in the *The Nigerian Chronicle*, 30 April 1909, "Burial Customs in the Yoruba Country. III – Eluku or Spirit Worship. (Among the Jebus [Ijebus])," 5.

distinguishes different kinds of *Èlúkú*'s supporters and thus convenes the distinct but overlapping audiences of the deity.

Beyond their ability to convey knowledge, and even beyond their ability to challenge or confirm dominant interpretations of local history, Yoruba historical narratives – *ìtàn* – also constitute an important factor in the making of social boundaries. With regard to *Èlúkú*, this practice is confirmed by a proverb, which emphasizes the privilege of being able to claim *Èlúkú* at all:

Èlúkú kì í ù ilé yà.
Èlúkú does not go to the wrong house.¹¹²

This proverb illuminates not only the close link between historical knowledge and social practice, but it also suggests the particular way in which experiences arising from historical connections – such as visits by *Èlúkú* – are limited to the social groups that own the relevant historical knowledge. *Èlúkú* investigates the causes of death of all its descendants, ensuring that any case of wrongdoing is exposed. The deity's interest in its descendants is independent of their Muslim or Christian identity. Thus, for those who own the *ìtàn* of *Èlúkú*, everyday life is marked not only by their shared descent with other children of the deity, but also by the possibility of encounter with, and protection by *Èlúkú*. The deity offers potent blessings to the living, and anyone staying in a house visited by *Èlúkú* may have heard the following song (in two voices) during an outing of the deity:

Ọmọ mi (ọmọ mi)
wé ma kú (wé ma kú),
wé ma rùn (wé ma rùn),
wà bimọ (wà bimọ),
ọkùn rín (ọkùn rín),
àbíró (àbíró),
óbìn rín (óbìn rín),
àbíyè (àbíyè).¹¹³

My child (my child),
don't die (don't die),
don't fall ill (don't fall ill),

¹¹² Meaning: *Èlúkú* goes to the right house where his descendants are to be found.

¹¹³ This song is quoted by Adesola in *The Nigerian Chronicle*, 28 May 1909, 5, and it can be sung with the same lyrics today even though it is usually sung in Remo dialect. The translation offered here differs slightly from Adesola's, which turns several of the song's negatives into positives, e.g. "stay healthy" instead of "don't fall ill." The added tone marks partly reflect the strongly tonal style of singing.

bear children (bear children),
 males (males),
 to stay with you (to stay with you),
 females (females),
 surviving (surviving).

In this and other songs,¹¹⁴ *Èlúkú* blesses its children by protecting them against the ever-present threat of death and disease. Exhorting its supporters not to die or fall ill instead of blessing them with long life or good health, it evokes and assuages their fears at the same time in order to remind them of its power. However, during an *Èlúkú* outing, it is not only the texts of songs and practices which create awe, but also the context of their production: many of those who hear the song above will only receive its blessings through locked doors and windows because it would be dangerous, or even deadly, for them to see the *òrìṣà* in its physical manifestation.

To explain why *Èlúkú* is so closely associated with death, a knowledgeable person may turn to etymology, and elucidate that the *òrìṣà*'s very name derives from a contraction of “È lù u kú,” meaning “You (must) beat him to death.”¹¹⁵ *Èlúkú*'s association with death, and especially the killing of criminals, creates fear both of death and of moral ostracism, as evoked in the curse

Èlúkú ló ma ṣá e pa.
 It is *Èlúkú* who will hack you to death.

This curse is described as “the worst and most unpardonable imprecation that a man can utter against his bitterest enemy” in a 1909 edition of *The Nigerian Chronicle*,¹¹⁶ and it is considered so fearsome that some people I spoke to would only refer to it indirectly, without uttering the actual words. Given the power associated with *Èlúkú*, the curse which evokes its name is considered so powerful that even its utterance for explanatory reasons might have negative repercussions. If it became public knowledge that

¹¹⁴ The rhythm and arrangement of this song serves as a template for other *Èlúkú* songs, which may expose thieves or wrongdoers, but which can also focus on gendered transgressions. One version popular in Ode Remo during the first decades of the 2000s centred on a man called Idowu, who had been spotted doing female work. This song also used the stark language of *Èlúkú*, and Idowu was described as “dead” because he did not assert his husbandly authority.

¹¹⁵ For further etymological explanations, see: *The Nigerian Chronicle*, 30 April 1909, “Burial Customs in the Yoruba Country. III – Eluku or Spirit Worship. (Among the Jebus [Ijebus]),” 5.

¹¹⁶ *The Nigerian Chronicle*, 30 April 1909, “Burial Customs in the Yoruba Country. III – Eluku or Spirit Worship. (Among the Jebus [Ijebus]),” 5.

someone had spoken these words, he or she might be reproached if something happened to another person associated with them. Thus, people might learn about the particular dread linked to *Ẹ́lúkú* both from the text of such a curse and from the careful negotiation of its utterance.

As a result of *Ẹ́lúkú*'s presence in everyday life, and its association with exchanges charged with individual and communal potency, most citizens of Ode Remo would not only know about the deity and its historical association with Iraye, but they would also have experienced the reality of power ascribed to Iraye's most powerful *òrìṣà*. For them, a discussion of Iraye's historical existence would be closely linked to the knowledge about the powers associated with *Ẹ́lúkú*, which permeated their lives – and deaths – in many ways and at different times.

These examples suggest that local knowledge about *Ẹ́lúkú* and, by extension, the *Ẹ́lúkú*, was not historical in an abstract sense: it was a powerful reality experienced regularly in everyday life by the deity's descendants. For this reason, the *Aláyé Odè*'s refusal to share the death duties with the *Ẹ́lúkú* was a challenge not only to the *Ẹ́lúkú* himself, but also to those otherwise associated with *Ẹ́lúkú*. As one petition put it:

the Alaiye Ode will get customary money of 12/- on each dead body when death receipt is to be issued [sic]. (...) Yet still he has no feelings for the living of the present Iloku [*Ẹ́lúkú*].¹¹⁷

Like many submissions to the Native Authority in 1948 and 1949, the authors implied that the *Ẹ́lúkú* had a right to income from burials which was willfully and even cruelly obstructed by the *Aláyé Odè*'s side. The moral outrage projected in this and similar texts might seem unreasonable given that so shortly after the resuscitation of the title, the *Aláyé Odè* could still argue that the matter had not been settled administratively. But for those whose understanding of the *Ẹ́lúkú*'s powers and rights reflected everyday knowledge about *Ẹ́lúkú*, the insistence on administrative procedure simply appeared as a ploy to deprive the *Ẹ́lúkú* of his rightful income.

Oríkì and Everyday Knowledge about *Ẹ́lúkú*'s Reach

The powers of *Ẹ́lúkú* are linked in various ways to Iraye's early settlement and its control of important stretches of land. While much knowledge about land is passed on in the *itàn* held by families and lineages, it is also contained in the genres that dominate everyday life. I would like to explore here especially the praise poems known as *oríkì*. *Oríkì* often illuminate, through poetically condensed language, the abilities and achievements of

¹¹⁷ NAI, Ijeprofile 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," S.A. Sobande-Sokalu to the Resident, Ijebu Province, 28 October 1948.

historical agents. Inherited by children both from their mother's and father's side, usually short (but sometimes longer) versions of personal *oriki* are part of the habitual interactions of many townspeople. Because of their ability to serve as markers for particular events and achievements, many Yoruba historians make use of *oriki*, often in order to describe powerful individuals.¹¹⁸ However, because *oriki* also act as anchors for more general historical knowledge, they inform, directly or indirectly, the more general historical arguments put forward in the debates about the status of Iraye and the *Ñlokú* in Ode Remo.

Oriki are often performed by women, and therefore they point to yet another way in which Yoruba historical knowledge is both constitutive and representative of different social groups. But by virtue of their transmission they are also among the first affirmations of individuality. *Oriki* are often used to greet individuals in the family home, at the market and during visits and other encounters, but they are also chanted by mothers, grandmothers and aunts to calm or delight babies and children.¹¹⁹ Especially at an early age, they are credited with the ability to reveal a child's true nature. Thus, if a child delights in the *oriki* of a particular ancestor, he or she may be believed to be a reincarnation of that ancestor's spirit. Equally, if a child never acquiesces to the *oriki* of her or his father's family, the child's paternal grandmother and aunts may suspect her or him of having a different father.¹²⁰ Based on the ability of *oriki* to illuminate the truth about a person's nature, a short discussion of *oriki* related to Iraye helps to explain the emotional valence attached by some participants to the historical debate in Ode Remo.

The verses discussed here were first quoted to me by Chief Susannah Olutayo Adekoya as part of her children's paternal *oriki*. Born in November 1930 in the Remo town of Ogere, located south-west of Ode Remo, Adekoya was a descendant of *Èlúkú* herself. She moved to her husband's house in Ode Remo in 1954, and thus would have learnt her husband's family's *oriki*, including the family's version of the *oriki* *Èlúkú* shortly after the resuscitation of the *Ñlokú*ship. Like Adekoya's children and in-laws, all Ode Remo citizens linked through their ancestors to Iraye's *Èlúkú* might be greeted with:

Omọ Èlúkú ará Ìràyè, omọ Èlúkú meḍen meḍen.
Child of *Èlúkú* from Iraye, child of *Èlúkú* the mighty one.

Adekoya explained to me that irrespective of being a devout Anglican, she would use this *oriki* to show her appreciation of her children and in-laws

¹¹⁸ Cf. Barber, "I.B. Akinyele," especially 37-41.

¹¹⁹ Barber, *I Could Speak*, 11.

¹²⁰ Interview with Chief Susannah Adekoya, the *Èṣṣe* of Ode Remo, 9 March 1998.

and their ancestors, and that it would be received with joy by all she knew, irrespective of religion.¹²¹ The fact that the verse addresses a human being as if he or she were the child of a mighty deity illustrates the extraordinary way in which *oriki* are able to open up boundaries between past and present, and between the living and the dead. In this way, *oriki* confer intense personal recognition through the extension of the individual's boundaries beyond the ordinary.¹²²

Opening space for discussion and questions, greetings involving *oriki* often involve explanations and expositions in the form of *itàn*, which may lead to the quotation of other *oriki* verses.¹²³ Thus, for example, the greeting of a person related to *Èlúkú* might include the lines below, which refer to specific geographical locations as well as to particular historical incidents, and which are linked to the celebration of *Èlúkú*:

Ọmọ a ké rúwọ̀n, w'órù nọ̀nọ̀ eri, ọmọ Sàkẹ̀kẹ̀ nọ̀nọ̀ eri.

Ọmọ Irúnmalẹ̀ a F'èlẹ̀ jà.

Child of "They cry in the bush, the pot breaks on the road to the river,"
child of *Sàkẹ̀kẹ̀* on the way to the river.

Child of a deity that attacks with a cutlass.

This verse evokes the location near the river Apowo,¹²⁴ in whose vicinity the path to the *Èlúkú* grove is located. While *Sàkẹ̀kẹ̀* is another name for *Èlúkú*, the verses describe the fear the deity creates among those who happen to have gone to the river to fetch water at the wrong time. Once these uninformed bystanders have heard the cry of *Èlúkú* coming from its grove, they are seized with such fear that they tremble and drop their water-pots before hiding or running away. The final line reminds the listener again of the reason for this fear: *Èlúkú* kills its enemies with a cutlass.

In this way, knowledge about the power of *Èlúkú* and the appropriate reaction of others is passed on and deepened. Hearing the *oriki* above, addressed to them as *Èlúkú's* children, owners of *oriki* *Èlúkú* would hear the evocation of the deity's capacity for inspiring fear as an aspect of their own lives and experiences. For this reason, their historical knowledge of *Èlúkú* is not simply information that has been passed down to them. It is empirical knowledge in the sense that it was also based on their emotional and physical experiences. For one of *Èlúkú's* children to deny the deity's powers would be to deny an aspect of their own experience and existence.

¹²¹ Interview with Chief Susannah Adekoya, the *Èweye* of Ode Remo, 9 March 1998.

¹²² Barber, *I Could Speak*, 14-16.

¹²³ Barber, *I Could Speak*, 25-34.

¹²⁴ The pronunciation in Remo dialect is closer to Apogho, and the name is occasionally spelled like that.

By opening up unique events to others in the way described above, *oríkì* also invest the geographical contexts of these events with meaning. Thus, the explanation of the *oríkì* above offers a powerful image both of the location of the *Èlúkú* grove near the Apowo river, and of the deity's long path into the town. Based on the *oríkì* above, even those who had never participated in the celebration of *Èlúkú* festivals, or who would not attend any ritual involving *Èlúkú* because of their commitment to the world religions, could hold important, and often very detailed knowledge about the ritual practices surrounding the deity.¹²⁵ Illuminating a particular aspect of the past in all its specificity, such *oríkì* could also be understood as confirming *Ńlókú* Adeboga's authority in a very concrete manner. Thus, while different communities claim land near the Apowo river today, this *oríkì* can be understood as confirming that such land remains under the overall control of *Èlúkú*, and by extension, the *Ńlókú*.

This and similar geographical knowledge certainly informed the debate over the legitimate administrative powers of *Ńlókú* Adeboga. Thus, *Aláyé Odè* Adeosin attempted to limit the *Ńlókú*'s power in Ode Remo by suggesting that the *Ńlókú*'s influence was confined to a small section of the town which he considered to constitute the boundaries of Iraye.¹²⁶ Adeosin then also prevented the celebration of any festivals associated with Iraye's deities beyond these boundaries.¹²⁷ But perhaps most importantly, the *Aláyé Odè* continued to sell parts of the town's land without offering any share to representatives of the town's early communities. These efforts met with strong opposition because they contradicted widespread knowledge about the specific locations to which the *Ńlókú*'s ritual powers extended. One group of petitioners was so incensed by the *Aláyé Odè*'s attempts to curb the *Ńlókú*'s influence that they suggested that:

if the Alaye Ode insist[s] to demarcate any boundary within the town (Ode Remo) which has never been before, he should demarcate the boundary of his own quarter alone and leave Nloku [sic].¹²⁸

The authors of another petition were so irritated by the *Aláyé Odè*'s disregard of the *Ńlókú*'s rights that they suggested that he was not a proper member of the town. They argued that:

¹²⁵ The fact that such knowledge exists independently of the actual ritual also explains why older ritual knowledge has been retained in many Yoruba communities even in the absence or transformation of ritual practice.

¹²⁶ NAI, Ijefprof 4/36, File 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku chieftaincy," District Officer Ijebu Division to Resident Ijebu Province, 15 March 1949.

¹²⁷ NAI, Ijefprof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku chieftaincy," *Ńlókú* S. Adeboga to *Akàrìgbò* and Council, 1 June 1949.

¹²⁸ NAI, Ijefprof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku chieftaincy," Seidun (Lemonu) and fifteen others to *Akàrìgbò* and Council, 4 October 1948.

the Alaye-Ode was born of the Awujale of Ijebu-Ode and [is therefore] a non-native of Ode Remo.¹²⁹

While this argument may have been partly rhetorical,¹³⁰ it shows the degree to which the fabric of existing histories could be stretched in order to support different political arguments. Given the importance of historical knowledge for social identity, the underlying implication of this formulation was that in behaving in a way that so blatantly contravened local knowledge about the *Ńlókú's* rights, the *Aláyé Odè* had shown himself not to be a real member of his community.

History as a Civic Project: The Limits of Agreement

By transforming an aspect of their personal experience into a potentially public text, correspondents and petitioners contributed to the making of a more general, and more widely shared, understanding of the town's past. While most petitioners hoped that the state would eventually confirm a version of the past that was close to their own views, they also emphasized that a wider agreement needed to reflect widespread civic engagement. The need for public debate was clearly articulated by a correspondent in 1950 who argued:

No son of the soil will be pleased with the present status of ODE-REMO, but can we improve it by sitting down complacently?

(...) we are prepared to face our onerous task with zeal and courage, without fear or favour, lest prosperity [posterity?] will curse us.¹³¹

Not every submission to the debate was as high-minded, but many texts from both sides refer to the need for communal peace by emphasizing the need for truth in order to prevent "agitation"¹³² and "confusion."¹³³ But

¹²⁹ NAI, Ijeprofile 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku chieftaincy," Imam Sodola and 8 others to the Resident, Ijebu Division and others, 16 January 1952.

¹³⁰ In several ways, the *oba's* office is constituted as that of an outsider to everyday life in the town. For details on the relationship between the *oba* and his town in Remo, see: Insa Nolte, "Identity and Violence: the Politics of Youth in Ijebu-Remo, Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 42-1 (2004), 61-89; Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo*, 33-58.

¹³¹ NAI, Ijeprofile 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," E.O. Kalejaiye, 27 October 1950. The submission appears like a standalone text and is entitled "A reshuffle of Ode Remo Town Council – A Desideratum."

¹³² NAI, Ijeprofile 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Seidun (Lemonu) and fifteen others to *Akàrigbò* and Council, 4 October 1948.

¹³³ NAI, Ijeprofile 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Sofade Osinloye and D.O. Epega to Resident, Ijebu Province, 31 October 1950.

what were the causes of disagreement surrounding the debate over *Ńlokú* Adeboga's *obaship*?

The discussion and comparison of local historical knowledge about the *Ńlokú*, experienced in the present by different sections of the population, contributed to a general agreement on the important facts of the community's past. In this context, the difference between diverse historical narratives and genres appeared as a resource rather than a problem, because it allowed for substantiation and confirmation.¹³⁴ As a result, the debate that surrounded the *Ńlokú* confirmed the facts that could serve as the tethers for a general historical narrative of the relationship between the *Aláyé Odè* and the *Ńlokú*, and between Ode Remo and Iraye.

However, the general agreement on the main facts underlying the resuscitation of the *Ńlokú* title did not result in agreement on the implications. While historical knowledge about the *Ńlokú* was rooted in the texts and practices known to different sections of the population, the content of such knowledge was focused on specific areas. Due to the segmented nature of historical knowledge and the distribution of such knowledge in a wide range of genres, generally agreed facts were sometimes separated by wide gaps of knowledge. Thus, both non-narrative texts and practices of historical relevance illuminated significant instances of the past, such as the *Ńlokú*'s association with the early settlement of Iraye and the fearsome and powerful deity of *Èlúkú*, but they could not describe the historical development of the relationship between the *Ńlokú* and the *Aláyé Odè*. And while historical narratives – *ìtàn* – could of course offer such explanations, their own openness to interpretation limited the possibility of a comprehensive reconstruction of the historical relationship between the two rulers in significant ways.

Even where details and turning points of the relationship between the *Aláyé Odè* and the *Ńlokú* could be recovered, these details had to be reinterpreted in the light of the colonial state's need for local legitimacy, and more specifically its reliance on *obas* and other traditional rulers. For example, while *Ńlokú* Adeboga's claim to a share in the local burial fees resonated with the memory of past and more recent practices, his demand to control the collection of taxes in Iraye, as well as to hold seats on the Ode Remo Native Court, the Ode Remo Town Council, and the Remo Native Administration Council¹³⁵ had no direct local equivalent or precedent.

¹³⁴ Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts*, 42, 67-102.

¹³⁵ In 1949, the *Ńlokú* officially became a member of the Town Council and a year later he joined the panel of the Native Court. However, he was temporarily expelled from the court and otherwise sabotaged by the *Aláyé Odè* several times because the *Aláyé Odè*'s followers were in the majority in the Town Council. See: Insa Nolte, "Ritualised Interaction and Civic Spirituality. Kingship and Politics in Ijebu-Remo," University of Birmingham, PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham (Birmingham, 1999), 233-239.

Rather, such demands derived from his claim to *obaship*, and from the particular form of recognition that was conferred upon this office by the colonial state.

Some correspondents were clearly aware of the interpretive gaps inherent in the knowledge of the past associated with the *Ńlókú*. Several of the texts submitted to the colonial authorities suggest their authors' alertness to the potentially problematic nature of historical reinterpretation through careful choice of words. This is particularly evident in the responses to a questionnaire, which Assistant District Officer C.C. Brigstocke, apparently somewhat exasperated by the ongoing stream of petitions and correspondence on this matter, distributed among local groups in 1950.¹³⁶ In response to a question about the *Ńlókú*'s status, *Ńlókú* Adeboga did not state categorically that the ancient *Ńlókú* was an *oba*, even though he personally had by then been recognized as an *oba* for over two years. Rather, he explained carefully that "Nloku is entitled and eligible to the title 'Oba' because he came from Ile Ife with his regalia of office."¹³⁷ Adeboga's cautious reply points to a sophisticated understanding of the possibilities and limitations of local historical knowledge.¹³⁸

Equally meticulous is an assertion by one of the *Aláyé Odè*'s supporters, who pointed out that the *Ńlókú* "may be entitled to the title 'Oba' but from time immemorial he was only spoken of as 'the Nloku' without the prefix."¹³⁹ The tone of these statements suggests that many local historians – including the struggle's main protagonists – were aware of the problems involved in interpreting, or translating into abstract and general categories, those aspects of knowledge of the past which were, through their everyday presence, known as highly specific and particular.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ NAI, Ijefrof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Assistant District Officer to *Akàrígbò* of Ijebu Remo, 15 December 1950.

¹³⁷ NAI, Ijefrof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Nloku S. Adeboga to the Assistant District Officer, 2 February 1951.

¹³⁸ Elsewhere in this response, Adeboga refers to the *Ńlókú* as the first settler in Ode Remo, but the only time he mentions *obaship* is in an enumeration of past *obas* who reigned together with the *Aláyé Odè*, which includes a third putative past *oba*, the *Líkanna*, the resuscitation of whose title is however not mentioned.

¹³⁹ NAI, Ijefrof 4/36, File No. 94 "Ode Remo Affairs: Nloku Chieftaincy," Answers to a Questionnaire on Nloku of Iraye by GBS Odunlami, 29 January 1951.

¹⁴⁰ An understanding of the *Ńlókúship* as a particular institution has been retained until today, as illustrated in the 2009 programme of the installation ceremony of the current *Aláyé Odè*, Amidu Adetunji Osho, which explains that "the Nloku of Iraye has maintained his traditional title from time immemorial" See: Programme of Official Installation Ceremony of His Royal Highness Oba Amidu Adetunji Osho Owadaniyan II as the Alaiye Ode of Ode-Remo, 25 June 2009. By evoking the age of the *Ńlókú* title without confirming it as that of an *oba*, this reference reproduces an important aspect of the debate explored here.

Thus, while the debate surrounding the resuscitation of the *Ńlokú* was shaped by particular political interests that emerged under colonial rule, it also reflected the possibilities and constraints of the textual forms and conventions associated with local historical knowledge. Because of the wide variety of texts that contained historical knowledge, participants of a public debate on his role could gather the available evidence regarding the role of the *Ńlokú* in order to validate particular claims. At the end of this process, a broadly based agreement emerged which confirmed the historical importance of the *Ńlokú*. The successful establishment and wide acceptance of the *Ńlokú* title today illustrates that such agreements could be a driving force for wider transformative civic and political projects.

But even as Ode Remo's history was opened up to popular debate and communal transformation, locally specific historical knowledge was retained in forms and practices that were largely independent of the wider debate. Contained in textual forms which existed separately from official or dominant narratives, and which continued to be mobilized in a wide range of social contexts, local historical knowledge was not transcended by wider and more general categories of explanation. As a result, historical knowledge which was at odds with the main narrative of the town – or the colonial administration – was not automatically subjugated knowledge. Implicated in the making and re-making of social groups and identities, the validity of such knowledge was continually confirmed by social practice and everyday life. And as long as it had the power to shape the lives of its owners, local historical knowledge also retained its potential for providing an alternative vision of the wider community.

In many small Yoruba towns, socially rooted knowledge has remained the main starting point for the reinterpretation of the past even after the end of the colonial period. Crossing and avoiding each other at crucial points, the Ariadne's threads of local knowledge are the main weave of local history. Forming a loose fabric at best, these threads can be stretched and shaped for interrogation in the present, where they may serve as the anchor points for the more tightly woven fabric of a more general, civic history.

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