

Review of *The Benin-Ife Controversy: Clash of Myths of Origins*, Compiled and Edited by Wajeed Obomeghie, (Wadorm Communications, Benin City, 2013) 368 pages.

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The Benin-Ife Controversy: Clash of Myths of Origins is a compendium of commentaries from scholars, professional and local historians, public commentators and opinion leaders on the debate over the nature and basis of the Benin-Ife relationship. The essays are culled from the Internet, newspapers and magazines.

The controversy surrounding the identities of the two ancient nations stemmed from the Oba of Benin's objection to the historical scholarship's deliberate imposition of a pan-Yoruba ancestry on the Benin monarchy. In his autobiography, *I Remain, Sir, Your Obedient Servant* (2004), the Oba of Benin, Omon'Oba Erediauwa, decries the attempt by some scholars at the Ibadan School of History to historicize the primacy of Ife and its kingship over Benin's. In his opinion, parts of Jacob Egharevba's elegant work *A Short History of Benin* were deliberately 'doctored' to suit a Yoruba agenda in Benin history. For example, he identifies inconsistencies between the first and fourth editions' descriptions of Benin's origin and relationship with Ife, and he uses a portion of his autobiography to address these discrepancies. The reactions in support of and against his position are the highlights of *The Benin-Ife Controversy's* essays.

The *Benin-Ife Controversy* contains fifty chapters of composite discourses on the nature and character of Benin-Ife relationship. The essays are examined from four main perspectives: the supporters of a Benin ancestry of Oduduwa; the

proponents of Ife ancestry of Benin or its kings; those who offered new insights and dimensions; and those who call for further research on the matter.

Oba Erediauwa is the protagonist of the group that insists on the Benin ancestry of Oduduwa, while the ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuwade, leads the opposing group. What some of Oba Erediauwa's supporters, such as Nosakhare Isekhure and Samuel Ogbemudia, commend as a rare display of courage by the Benin monarch in unveiling the truth about the Benin-Ife relationship is taken as an attempt to rewrite history by the likes of Ade Ajayi and Dele Adeoti. The other dimension to the debate is the disputed location of Uhe (Ile-Ife), which some writers believe was around the Niger-Benue confluence, where the Nok culture flourished. If it is established that Uhe is not the present Ile-Ife, then we have two different scenarios described as one, though Ade Obayemi's research has disproved the existence of a supreme ruler of Oduduwa's status around the Niger-Benue confluence.

Through discourse on the myth and identity of the two societies, the commentaries exemplify studies in the propagation of ethnic sentiments, patronage and loyalty. These play out visibly in the nature, character and direction of the arguments put forward by the various contributors in favour of their ethnic groups. What appears as direct support of the view that Ife is the cradle of humanity is Wole Soyinka's assertion that 'unlike the city of Ile-Ife, Benin may not be the cradle of the black race or indeed humanity but yet again I invite you to take consolation in the fact that her history is a paradigm of creativity and cultural validation at its most robust and crucial arc in the very trajectory of civilizations'. While such a statement might have acknowledged the sophistication and rich history of Benin, its reference to Ife as the cradle of the black race, without tangible evidence to back that position, amounts to elaboration of myth in favour of one society.

Ade Ajayi understands what myths represent in history when he admits that 'they are accepted as a matter of belief which is not tied to reason but faith and belief system'. Certainly, some of the stories establishing the basis of relations between the two societies must have been conjectured to suit local interests. What compelled Benin to request a king from Ile-Ife is an important object of analysis. Was Ile-Ife a major military power with an enviable monarchical

tradition? Was there a prior link with the society before the request? This is an important area that needs further research. If we uphold the myth that Oduduwa helped Obatala to finish the work of creation, as Siyan Oyeweso opined, what historical lesson do we learn from the popular assertion that Ife already had a complex society before the advent of Oduduwa He is correct, however, to ask why Benin, an outstanding and dreaded kingdom of its time, should prefer to uphold as its king the son of a convict who escaped execution. That Oranmiyan, a prince of Yoruba extraction, was sent by his father to honour the Benin request gives credence to the Ife ancestry of the second Benin dynasty.

Rather than examining the nature of evidence available to Oba Erediauwa, Ade Ajayi is quick to dismiss Oba Erediauwa's claims as lacking evidence. 'He did not cite any evidence. It's the personal opinions of the Oba which is not based on facts. I believe in the story as told by Ooni of Ife. It is better founded than what the Oba of Benin is trying to tell us and the Oba of Benin has no locus standi as it were to tell the story of Oranmiyan.' The authority to speak or write the history of a people, from Ajayi's point of view, rests with the son of the soil. Onigu Otite is right in this regard: if the Oba of Benin has no locus standi to speak about Oranmiyan simply because he was a Yoruba prince, he surely has the authority to speak about Ekhaladerhan, a Benin prince whose nobility was uncontroversial according to the traditions of his people.

There is nothing wrong in creating myths to establish identities for a people. Groups of people do so to legitimize their existence. What is wrong is the elevation of one's own myth above the others. The Benin monarch's contention that Oduduwa's metamorphosis started from Benin before ending up at Ile-Ife, where he became king, is Benin's side of the story. If this narrative is incompatible with what is held in Yoruba traditions, it is best disproved based on the Yoruba side of the story. After all, Benin's monarch is telling the story of Benin, not of the Yoruba.

Conversely, a reconsideration of the idea that Ekhaladerhan became Oduduwa at Ile-Ife is necessary, especially as the location of Ile-Ife varies in different account. More research should focus on what compelled the choice of Ife as the place from which to request a king. Reuben Abati correctly observes that it is difficult to establish the identity of Prince Ekhaladerhan as the same man that

left Benin to become Oduduwa at Ife. The Yoruba, in this respect, must also be allowed to tell the story of Oduduwa the way they know it. Disagreements on these issues should instigate healthy scholarly discourse rather than hostility. Instead of descending into the excessive use of invectives, the two societies should institute a joint academic effort to unravel the basis of the relationship.

There are elements of Eurocentric imports in the development of the historiography of the two societies, which influenced their stories of origin, including that of Oduduwa. Critics of myth in history would be tempted to discredit the Oduduwa story's application by various commentators as the foundation of the histories of the two societies. Moses Ochonu argues in this regard that the colonialists commissioned colonial ethnographers and anthropologists to collect information that aided administrative policies. They regarded Africa as the land of emotion, sentiment, and myth—as opposed to Europe, which was believed to be a land of reason, as indicated in the works of W.F. Hegel, Max Weber, Martin Hiedegger, Immanuel Kant, and, to some extent, Karl Marx. The European ethnographers and anthropologists traversed Nigerian villages, visiting monarchs who told them tales of origin. As the colonialists collected these tales, their preference was supposedly for the more widely accepted and believable versions, but they suppressed stories that were incompatible with their perceptions of Africans. Ochonu submits that it is pointless to fight over mythical narratives with a Eurocentric agenda.

A number of grammatical and typographical errors exist in the book, including pages iii, xviii, 97 and 157, which the editor should correct in subsequent editions. We must commend Omo n'Oba Erediauwa, whose publication instigated the debates. The contestations that greeted his opinions have helped to deepen our knowledge of the history of the two societies. Wajeed Obomeghie, too, must be commended for the compilation of the reactions into a handy book for posterity. His opinions, in the epilogue, rightly identify the difficulty inherent in claims of absolute fairness in historical analysis. This point brings to mind the problem of objectivity: it is difficult to be completely dispassionate and detached in analysis. Without question, though, Obomeghie's work on this compendium has contributed immensely to the development of the historiography of the two societies.