

In last week's column, I expressed sadness over the death of Professor Saburi Biobaku. Much has been written and said in the eulogies about Biobaku's constructive roles in public life and the universities of Ibadan, Ife, and Lagos: I wish to focus on Biobaku as a historian.

Biobaku's classic work, *The Egba and their Neighbors 1842-1872*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1957 (Based on his University of London PhD Thesis 1951), ranks with Dike's *Classic Trade and Politics on the Niger* (1956) as the first scholarly publications in Nigerian history by Nigerian academics. Biobaku's work was based on written and oral sources and did a great deal to prove the acceptability of oral traditions as a valid source for the writing of the history of pre-colonial, pre-literate societies. In recognition of their pioneering roles in Nigerian historiography, the Historical Society of Nigeria in 1980 honored Professor Dike, Biobaku, and Smith with fellowships of the society. Biobaku's next major publication, *Sources of Yoruba History* (1973), which he edited, arose in part from the finding of the Yoruba historical research scheme, of which Biobaku was the founding director in 1965.

Biobaku inspired the generation of younger scholars and students to explore pre-colonial Nigerian history using archaeology, cultural history, oral traditions, and Arabic written sources as a part of their methodology. Beyond the academic study of history, Professor Biobaku devoted himself to bringing history to the general public. He popularized history and Nigerian traditional culture in radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, in talks to schools, businesses, clubs, and book launches.

On a personal note, I wish to acknowledge my debt to Professor Biobaku. In 1973 when I began my research on the history of Nigerian women, I discovered that the earliest scholarly publication on the subject was Biobaku's article, "Madam Tinubu" in "Eminent Nigerians of the 19th Century (Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation 1960)". Professor Biobaku was very helpful when I consulted him on my research, and he remained unflinchingly supportive when later I consulted him on my biographies of Ayo Rosiji and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti. I quoted Biobaku's "oral testimony" in the Rosiji biography and acknowledged his contributions to the book. At the launch, he graciously agreed to review Ayo Rosiji: *Man With Vision*. In his last few years, the professor undertook to edit the *New History of Abeokuta* and insisted that there should be a chapter in *Egba Women*.

Nigerian historiography has lost one of its great pioneers and I shall miss Professor Biobaku's understanding and support of my work. Fortunately, Biobaku has left us his elegantly written, insightful, and highly informative autobiography, in two wonderful, titled volumes— *When We Were Young and When We Were No Longer Young*.

As a professional historian and a cultured man of letters, Professor Biobaku knew the profound importance of autobiographies and memories by those who play a role in public life. These writings, in turn, became historical sources to be studied in the future.

# Nina' Mba's **Insider / Outsider's Account**



## **Biobaku, Adieu**

### **Yoruba, Igbo, and Judaism**

Early in his career, Biobaku explored the view that the Yoruba were not autochthonous to their present habitation. There already existed a belief that the Yoruba had migrated from the Middle East.

Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther concluded from his translation of the Bible that the Yoruba were a Jewish people. Initially, Biobaku toyed with the theory adhered to by Diop, that the Yoruba had been part of the ancient all-black Meroe dynasty of Egypt/Sudan who had begun a very gradual migration southwards in the 17th century B.C. A second wave migration in the 10th century AD had led to the establishment of Ile Ife. Biobaku rejected the idea that Yoruba was an Egyptian word: it was the word the people of OYO used to identify themselves

Later in his career, Biobaku was more skeptical about this hypothesis and appreciated the weight of archaeological, linguistic, ethnobotanical, anthropological, and historical evidence uncovered by his younger colleagues, which point to the dispersal of peoples from within Africa.

Recently, the discredited hypothesis of the Middle East origin of various nationalities in Nigeria has been revisited with the propagation by a group of Israelis and Igbos of the bizarre theory that the Igbos around Aguleri in Anambra State belong to the "lost tribe" of Judah of biblical times. As such, so the fantasy goes, they are entitled to migrate to Israel based on Israeli law of automatic entry to any person who can prove a Jewish identity.

There is confusion among Nigerians over Jews and Israelis, so clarification of terms may be helpful. Jewishness is not a nationality: there are Jews in the U.S. Russian, South Africa, Ethiopia, who are citizens of those countries. There are few Jews who are Nigerian citizens by naturalization (e.g., Lebanese Jews) or by birth (children of Nigerian fathers and foreign Jewish mothers: Jewish identity is inherited from the mother). Israel is a nation whose citizens are predominantly but not exclusively Jewish: there is a minority of Muslim and Christian Israelis.

More of this in the next column but related to its religious, not the historical plane, is the emergence of religious organizations in Nigeria, which claim to be partly Jewish. So, I learnt from the **Sunday Guardian**, February 25 in the Ibru Centre Supplement on Ecumenism, Chari-

ties, and Ethics( which featured "variants of Judaism in Nigeria"-- The House of Yahweh, Ogudu, the Christ Foundation Sabbath Mission, Ogudu, and Sabbath Day Church of God) all have incorporated elements of ancient Judaism in their philosophies and practices. I stress ancient because they also practice polygamy, which has been banned by Judaism for millennials.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding in the thinking of these organizations. The difference between Judaism and Christianity is that Chris-

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**How odd  
Of God  
To choose  
The Jews**

**But not so odd  
As those who choose  
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But spurn the Jews**

**Oh no  
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He knows  
What's what**

**It isn't  
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The Jews  
Chose God.**

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tians believe in the divinity of Jesus and the religion is based on that concept. Jews believe that Jesus was a Jewish prophet who broke away to form his cult, as had other Jewish reformers, before and after Jesus. While the two religions share many moral tenets and ethical values, the basic difference is irreconcilable.

However, one positive spin-off from this appropriation of Jewish customs into Christian churches is that it promotes religious tolerance and works against religious anti-Semitism. Judaism, however, does not appropriate Christian elements into its faith: Judaism, unlike Christianity and Islam, is a non-proselytizing religion.

The uneasy relationship between Judaism and other religions, and the burdensome "special relationship" between Jews and their God is well conveyed by this pithy verse and riposte: How odd of God to choose the Jews; But not so odd as those who choose a Jewish God but spurn the Jews; Oh no, It's not, He knows what's what; It isn't odd the Jews chose God.