

**LAGOS NOTES**

**AND**

**RECORDS**

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## **Some Considerations Concerning d'Avezac's Notice sur le Pays et le Peuple des Yebous en Afrique**

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### *Abstract*

*This paper is in the form of research notes. It reviews certain aspects of a contemporary ethnographic study of early nineteenth-century Ijebu society. The original publication of the study was in French, but subsequently translated into English with annotations. The objective here is to shed light on issues of anthropological and historical significance concerning the Ijebu arising from the study.*

### *Introduction*

This short discourse examines some aspects of the now well-known recollections of an emancipated Ijebu slave in Paris on the nature and character of Ijebu society in the early decades of the nineteenth century. His account resulted from a number of interview sessions held with him by d'Avezac, a French ethnographer in 1839. It was subsequently published in 1845 by d'Avezac under the title *Notice sur le Pays et le Peuple des Yebous en Afrique*.

D'Avezac's informant, whose name he writes as 'Ochi-Fêkouè-Dê,' was born about 1798. Though an indigene of Ijebu-Ode, the capital of the Ijebu Kingdom, he was born in Makun, a lagoon town located on the eastern edge of the kingdom to which his father had taken refuge after committing a capital offence. 'Ochi-Fêkouè-Dê' took to long-distance trading at an early age, and it was in the course of one of his journeys on the lagoon that he was captured by Ijo pirates and sold into slavery in June 1820. He was shipped to Brazil, but sometime between 1836 and

1837, he was brought to Paris where he was introduced to d'Avezac in 1839.

English translations of, and commentaries on, sections of d'Avezac's work have appeared in a number of publications.<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive, however, is P.C. Lloyd, 'Osifekunde of Ijebu,' in P.D. Curtin, *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967, pp.217 - 288). On account of its comprehensive nature Lloyd's 'Osifekunde of Ijebu' is used as the main reference in the examination of some aspects of d'Avezac's work in this paper.

#### *The Name Ochi- Fêkouè-Dê*

One of the problematic aspects of d'Avezac's work is the issue of the identification of his informant's name. According to him, his informant had 'the double name of Ochi-Fekoue, to which the Patronymic De was added - thus the full name of Ochi-Fekoue-De ...'<sup>2</sup> In his attempt to identify this name, Lloyd writes:

*It suggests Osifekode, but while Osifeko, meaning 'Osi (a deity) commiserates' is well known, Osifekode is not. Another possibility might be Osifekunde meaning 'Osi has appeared in the midst of tears' but the nearest name generally known today is Osifekunwe, or 'Osi has washed himself in the tears (of the suppliant mother).'*<sup>3</sup>

Lloyd, however, prefers Osifekunde 'mainly because D'Avezac [sic] was generally very careful with his orthography, and he appears to be attempting to reproduce the unusual Yoruba nasal sound in the syllable "kun".'<sup>4</sup> A fundamental problem with Lloyd's interpretation is the fact

that Lloyd misconstrued the meaning of 'Osi' (d'Avezac's Ochi). In the first place, the word *Osi* in Ijebu lexicon does not mean or refer to any particular deity; it is a term for ancestor-spirit. Its proper form with diacritical mark is *Osi*.<sup>5</sup> *Osi* is quite different from *Osi* which is used as a prefix in names, and is a synonym for king.<sup>6</sup> Thus while it is possible to bear *Osifeko* (a king commiserates) *Osifeko* (the ancestor-spirit commiserates) is inconceivable. Similarly, while the name *Osifekunwe* (the king washes [an object] with tears [of joy]) is used, *Osifekunwe* (the ancestor-spirit 'has washed himself in the tears [of the suppliant mother]') is not. Another problem with Lloyd's interpretation is that, although he admits that d'Avezac, 'was generally very careful with his orthography,' he ignores the diacritical mark (the French *accent grave* :\ ) used by d'Avezac in *Fekoue*, which constitutes a distinct syllable.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the foregoing observations, it seems reasonable to suggest that the 'double name of Ochi-Fekoue' used by d'Avezac may be identified with the Ijebu name of *Osifekunwe*. The absence of the letter 'w' in 'Fekoue' may be explained by the fact that the 'w' is usually silent when it appears in Yoruba names or titles. Thus, for example, the name of the well-known nineteenth-century Ijebu warrior, *Onafowokan*, appeared in contemporary records as *Nafokan*.<sup>8</sup> It is instructive to note that in pre-colonial Yoruba society names were given in consideration of pedigree or the circumstances of birth.<sup>9</sup> The name *Osifekunwe* signifies royal descent or link; which corresponds with the evidence of d'Avezac's informant that one of the eighteenth-century kings of Ijebu was his maternal great-uncle - a brother to his father's mother.<sup>10</sup>

The name *Osifekunwe* is by itself not a full title. To d'Avezac's 'Ochi-Fekoue' is added *De* which he described as