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“Iku Ya J’esin”: Politically Motivated Suicide, Social Honor, and Chieftaincy Politics in Early Colonial Ibadan

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Résumé

Le suicide est généralement considéré comme une action antisociale réprouvée par la société. C’est dans ce sens-là que les sociologues et les psychologues, entre autres experts, ont rendu compte de l’incidence du suicide dans nombre de sociétés. Les théories les plus à la pointe, ne mettent pas l’accent, cependant, sur le “suicide héroïque.” L’incarnation de ce “genre” de suicide, que nous proposons d’examiner ici, sont ceux des politiciens les plus en vue au début de l’Ibadan colonial. Cet article suggère que la clé pour la compréhension de ces cas de suicides réside dans le passé sédimenté de ces gens — le passé général des Yorouba, et l’héritage militaire de l’Ibadan du XIXe siècle — et également dans leur conception de l’honneur et des normes sociales. L’idéal de l’honneur était imposant à tel point qu’il survécut les trois décennies de l’ère coloniale et cela malgré la nature de la chefferie d’Ibadan infestée par les intrigues et malgré l’interférence officielle des autorités coloniales. Cet article conclut que le suicide politiquement motivé, bien qu’auto-destructif, était sensé servir en fait une cause honorable, au point que ceux des politiciens impliqués sont promus au statut de héros, alors même qu’ils sont décédés. Il est par conséquent important que les théoriciens de suicide prennent en considération ce genre d’exceptions.

Abstract

Suicide is generally regarded as an anti-social behavior. It is, perhaps, for this reason that sociologists and psychologists, among other experts, have been interested in studying the incidence of suicide in many societies. Most modern theories on suicide, however, do not emphasize the idea of

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“heroic suicide.” Epitomizing this “genre” of suicide are the high profile, politically motivated suicides in early colonial Ibadan examined here. This article suggests that the key to understanding these suicide cases is to be found not only in these people’s multilayered pasts — the general Yoruba past and Ibadan’s nineteenth-century military heritage — but also in their conception of honor and in their social norms. The ideals of honor thus carried over into the twentieth century were so strong that they survived the first three decades of colonial rule despite the intrigue-laced nature of Ibadan chieftaincy politics and the official interference of the colonial authorities. This article concludes that politically motivated suicide, though self destructive was actually meant to serve an honorable purpose such that those involved became heroes even in death. There is therefore the need for suicide theorists to highlight exceptions like these.

Introduction

Politically motivated suicide was a common occurrence in early colonial Ibadan. Within a space of ten years, three principal chiefs committed suicide: *Baale* Dada Opadere (1907), *Baale* Irefin (1915), and *Balogun* Ola (1917). They did this because they perceived themselves on the brink of ignominy. This practice of political suicide was, however, not a twentieth-century development. It had its antecedents in nineteenth-century Ibadan politics, which were powered by a military machine laden with intrigues, machinations, and intense competition for public office and social advancement. Again, politically motivated suicide did not originate in Ibadan. It had always been reflected in Yoruba social thought and political culture, hence the saying: *“iku ya j’esin”* (death is preferable to ignominy). However, because of reasons peculiar to Ibadan that shall be discussed below, this notion gained more ground in Ibadan than elsewhere in Yorubaland.

This article argues that the desire (which sometimes bordered on duty) to preserve personal and family honor in the face of impending ignominy was a major factor that moved public figures to commit suicide. The agency of these individuals in choosing death over exile is here acknowledged. Far from being “victims,” they made the most of disadvantageous situations, turned them around and earned respect and esteem in death, instead of the ridicule that would have been their lot. Suicide thus served an “honorable” purpose for them. Here, the idea of suicide as a means to honor (either of preserving “existing” honor or of earning “fresh”

honor) does not contradict the idea of suicide as a means of averting shame. The two ideas are, in fact, interrelated because it is in averting shame that honor is preserved. This article also makes the point that despite the fact that colonial rule made militarism redundant in Ibadan, it could not immediately sweep aside the ideals of heroic honor associated with it. What the local ruling elite did was to demonstrate this heroic honor on the "battleground" of chieftaincy politics. All of these ideas raise a number of issues. What forces "institutionalized" politically motivated suicide in Yorubaland? What circumstances were considered ignominious at different periods of Ibadan history? What did it mean to have honor in death? Did such suicides have any cleansing effect on society? In tackling these and other related issues I first examine relevant theories of honor and of suicide to see what light these could shed on the Yoruba / Ibadan cases discussed in this article. The next two sections examine the idea and practice of suicide in Old Oyo (representing pre-Ibadan Yorubaland) and in nineteenth-century Ibadan respectively. This is to accentuate the changes and continuities that presaged the colonial period. This is followed by a presentation of the three Ibadan high profile suicide cases that took place between 1907 and 1917. The article ends with an analysis of the honor in suicide.

On Honor and Suicide

Honor is a composite concept that has to do with esteem, respectability, and reputation. The twin elements of self-regard and social esteem run through several definitions of honor. According to Julian Pitt-Rivers,

... honor is the value of a person in his own eyes but also in the eyes of the society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride (1966, 21).

This means that a personal evaluation of oneself is not enough to confer honor, the society must "acknowledge that claim" which is usually manifested through a person's reputation. The role of society as judge is thus very significant in the acquisition of honor by its members. These two dimensions of honor, the personal and the social, are, as a result, closely related.

Another variant of the honor theory is provided by Elvin Hatch (1989, 348), which he calls a "self-identity approach" to the study of honor. According to this approach, individual actions and life are seen as being important as judged by "criteria that transcend one's personal self-interest" (Hatch 1989, 349). These criteria are laid down by society. Even though Hatch's emphasis is on personal self-identity, it is clear that such an identity cannot be pursued independently of the "opinions of others," which provide the acceptable model for individuals' actions. What Hatch seems to be saying here is that because the criteria that an individual uses to assess or guide his conduct are those prescribed by society, there is an intimate link between honor as the worth of a person in his own eyes and honor as the way society sees him. This again reinforces the role of society as judge. "The observing other is ubiquitous," writes Hatch (1989, 349), while Pitt-Rivers observes:

... public opinion forms ... a tribunal before which the claims to honor are brought, "the court of reputation" as it has been called, and against its judgments there is no redress. For this reason it is said that public ridicule kills (1966, 27).

Pitt-Rivers might have meant this figuratively, but the principle holds true in real, literal terms as the cases of Ibadan chiefs later discussed in this article show; in which case it was the fear of public ridicule, here called "ignominy," that partially drove them to kill themselves. Another crucial point in this theory is the collectivity of honor. This applies to social groups such as families, lineages and kin groups. Within such groups, an act of dishonor by a single member will affect all others just as a single member could bask in the honor of the group. Thus, where status is ascribed by birth, "honor derives not only from individual reputation, but from antecedence" (Pitt-Rivers 1966, 23).

Frank H. Stewart (1994, 21) defines honor as an individual's right to respect. This right exists both subjectively and objectively. These two levels again correspond to personal claims to honor and societal acknowledgement of same. But more significantly, Stewart (1994, 59) identifies two types of honor: horizontal honor, which is the kind of respect that is due to an equal; and vertical honor, which is the right to special respect enjoyed by those of superior social rank. These two types of honor are not mutually exclusive. One may enjoy the respect of his peers as well as that of his social inferiors.

A definition of honor is perhaps not complete without juxtaposing it with "shame." The concept of shame comes up in many discussions of honor and is particularly relevant to the issue of ignominy raised in this article. According to J.G. Peristiany, honor and shame "are the two poles of an evaluation" (1966, 9) since they stand on opposite sides of a spectrum. Peristiany identifies two fundamental categories of people: "those endowed with honor and those deprived of it" (1966, 10). Unni Wikan (1984, 636) has reacted to this by insisting that honor and shame are not necessarily binary opposites and that shame contrasts more significantly with other concepts (although she does not tell what those other concepts are). Again, she reports that in certain societies in the Middle East, it is shame, rather than honor that is the predominant concern (see also Kressel 1992, 36). And instead of Peristiany's two categories, she insists there is just one category: that of shameful people (Wikan 1984, 636). I tend to agree with Inger-Lise Lien (2002, 20) who offers what appears to be a mediatory approach to this debate on honor and shame. According to him, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. One might be honorable in one context and shameful in another context. Whatever is the case, it makes sense to assume that in societies where honor is highly prized, people would be afraid of conducts that are dishonorable. As to the specific value placed on honor in particular societies, only empirical studies will bear this out. And in heterogeneous societies where many groups prescribe criteria for attaining honor, honor thus becomes a contested category (see also Iliffe 2005, 4). Moreover, as honor is emphasized in particular societies, the idea of equality in dignity for all men becomes more remote because some would certainly enjoy more honor than others.

Ignominy, as used in this article refers to a public kind of shame. It corresponds to the breakdown or cessation of the social esteem that an individual enjoys. This is to be distinguished from private shame or self-condemnation, which arises when an individual falls below their own self-expectation and which might not yet be known to a "wide" public. The "public" here is thus a shifting, elastic body whose composition could range from the immediate family group to wider audiences, which in turn are made up of several "publics." But when the public, as constituting the significant Other and the arena within which an individual had been

previously invested with honor rises to condemn, or withdraws its approbation from the individual on account of his misconduct or violation of social mores, such a situation becomes ignominious, transcending the normal boundaries of personal shame. This results in public disgrace and ridicule; where scorn and contempt now replace honor and esteem. Among Oyo-Yoruba groups, this state of ignominy was called *es'n* and was differentiated from other forms of shame such as *etẹ* (ridicule), *abùkù* (disgrace) and *itijú* (embarrassment / "mild" shame).

The literature on suicide is very vast and varied, produced by experts in sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, and the biomedical sciences (Whalen 1964, 91-110; Cresswell 1972, 133-45; Daube 1972, 387-437; Noon 1978, 371-86; Windstrup 1980, 169-82; Pescosolido and Georgianna 1989, 33-48; Marra 1991, 273-88). The most popular are, however, the sociological and psychological approaches. Particularly interesting is the vociferous debate between some sociologists and psychologists on the issue of the approach best suited to the study of suicide. One side advocates the adoption of what it calls "psychological autopsies" while the other insists on purely sociological methods (Mauk *et al.* 1994, 1249-55; Stack and Gundlach 1994, 1257-61). The problem with these theories is that while some of them have been tested with success in western societies, they only have limited applicability in African contexts. An exception is Emile Durkheim's sociological theory of suicide. He identifies three types of suicide — the egoistic, altruistic, and the anomic — through which he attempts to show that the incidence of suicide depends on the degree to which a person feels connected to, or integrated within society (Durkheim [1897] (1952). His conception of altruistic suicide corresponds roughly to the political suicides in Ibadan. There, the fact that some individuals were highly integrated into the society made them more inclined to "sacrifice" their lives for the group's goals and survival. Embattled public figures thus killed themselves as a way of preserving their personal and family honor in the face of impending alienation and ignominy. However, even this altruistic explanation, in a case like this, does not capture the intense social tensions surrounding such suicide.

Meanwhile, the sociological study of suicide has been modified since Durkheim. Jean Baeschler, writing eighty-two years later,

sees suicide as the response of people to certain problems. This response is reflected in the typologies of suicide that he identifies, namely, escapist, aggressive, oblativ and ludic (Baeschler 1979, 59-206). While the oblativ suicide appears to have some semblance to political suicides, its sacrificial ethos, just as reflected in Durkheim's altruistic suicide above, evokes a sense of passivity and resignation that are unrepresentative of the Ibadan context.

Most psychologists take Sigmund Freud as their point of departure due to his introspective approach to the study of suicide. Karl Menninger's (1938, 24-80) theory identifies three distinct psychic elements in suicide: the wish to kill, the wish to be killed and the wish to die. All these resonate with Freud's ([1930] 1963) analysis of the death impulse and his emphasis on the sadistic and masochistic tendencies of the suicide. Edwin Shneidman's (1981, 221-31; 2001, 202-03) "mentalist" view of suicide also emphasizes unbearable psychological pain as being at the root of all suicides. These psychopathological frameworks may shed light on ordinary suicide cases among the general population, but they are difficult to apply to cases of culturally-sanctioned suicides among the political elite. Again, while these theories may not apply equally to all types of suicides in Africa, they, however, underline the role of the individual psyche as well as the significance of the social institutions and environment within which such suicides take place.¹ Diachronic studies of specific socio-cultural contexts would serve a better purpose of exposing recurring patterns and highlighting notable exceptions as well as identifying changes and continuities in a society's practice of suicide. Paul Bohannan's (1967) collection of empirical studies on homicide and suicide in Africa, though a synchronic analysis, is particularly important because of its comparative dimension, although most of the communities studied are from the same East African region.

Certain questions are left unanswered by these theories especially in their failure to recognize "honor" as a possible causal factor. How much honor is attached to heroic suicide? How does society justify such suicides? To unravel these issues, we need to examine the Yoruba past (before the foundation of Ibadan) to identify the origin and "institutionalization" of political suicides; the nature of social cum political pressures that made such an option; and the various circumstances considered ignominious in the

Yoruba context. This next discussion will start with the Yoruba worldview and attitude to death and how these intersected with cases of suicide. It will also examine the differences between political suicide and ordinary suicide (practiced by the masses).

Suicide in Pre-nineteenth-Century Yorubaland

YORUBA COSMOLOGY AND BELIEF ABOUT DEATH

The Yoruba conceive the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms — *aye* (the visible world of the living) and *orun* (the spiritual and invisible domain of the ancestors, gods and spirits) (Drewal, Pemberton and Abiodun 2003, 69). The two realms are closely connected in the sense that the inhabitants of *orun* regularly involve themselves in human affairs. Thus a typical Yoruba community is not just perceived as a geographical entity with clearly defined boundaries and with a web of horizontal networks of kinship / familial relationships. Instead, it is also seen as a transcendental continuum, which stretches back into the past to include the dead, represented by the ancestors, and at the same time anticipates the future world of the yet unborn. These three elements: the dead, the living, and the unborn always feature prominently in Yoruba traditional discourses on life.

Therefore, death is not seen as the end of life. It is a means of crossing to the other side. Death is a “dematerialization of the vital breath or soul, a transformation from earthly to spiritual existence ... where the dematerialized soul may choose to stay forever ... [or] make periodic returns to earth through reincarnation” (Lawal 1977, 51). This belief in an afterlife and in reincarnation assures the Yoruba of immortality. It is therefore within this belief system that the idea of burying valuables, slaves, and asking other notable personalities to die with a departed king and accompany him to *orun* becomes understandable. Perhaps, the cultural practice which best demonstrates the Yoruba belief in immortality is that of the *egungun* (masked ancestral spirit). An *egungun* “is believed to be the spirit of a deceased person who has returned from ... (the abode of the ancestors) to visit his people. Hence, he is called *ara orun* (visitor from *orun*)” (Dopamu 2004, 656; Morton-Williams 1960, 36). The *egungun* cult is controlled by men who make visible the ancestral spirits and command their power. Spirits of the departed

are thus celebrated in the annual *egungun* festival and are consulted from time to time by members of their family. This belief in life after death is therefore reflected in the people's attitude to suicide as illustrated below. It is interesting to note that while the Yoruba frowned upon suicide among ordinary people and stigmatized the relations of the affected person, they valorized the practice among the elite whenever it occurred within the context of a political contest or as a ritual obligation.

SUICIDE AMONG THE NON-POLITICAL CLASS

Suicide, among the general masses in pre-colonial Yorubaland, was considered abominable and a pollution of the community. It was seen as an affront to society. The spirit of the dead man was regarded as a malevolent force, capable of attacking other living folks in its bid to avenge itself. Worse still, suicides, like cruel people, can never be reincarnated. Nobody commemorates the spirit of a suicide in an *egungun* mask. It was also forbidden to render funeral dirges called *oku pipe* during the burial of a suicide (Amoo 1983, 7). According to Bascom (1969, 76), suicides "can never reach heaven [*orun*] and having renounced earth, belong to neither. They become evil spirits and cling to treetops like bats or butterflies." Therefore, considerable stigma was attached to suicide as whoever contemplated it was also seen in certain instances as a coward, unable to stand up under the pressures of life. Members of the suicide's family were ostracized as people were reluctant to marry their sons and daughters. A closer look at the Yoruba attitude to suicide, however, reveals an ambivalence, depending on the one hand on the circumstances in which suicide was carried out and on the other, on the status of the individuals involved. A.K. Ajisafe, in his study of Yoruba laws and customs, which was largely based on oral traditions, underlines this ambivalence:

When a man finds life burdensome, disgraceful, and perilous to him, and consequently commits suicide he is given great credit and honor. But when out of shame for a mean act he commits suicide his corpse is considered abominable and cast into the bush unburied (1924, 31).

Although Ajisafe gives no specific instances of when life could be "burdensome, disgraceful and perilous," one could assume these

to include situations of extreme poverty, indebtedness and incurable / stigmatizing illnesses such as leprosy. Even in such cases, the "great credit and honor" mentioned by Ajisafe was probably expressed as secret admiration by individual observers rather than public approval or commemorative acts in which society is mobilized as would have been the case if the suicide were a member of the political class. The Yoruba have this tacit belief that there is a level beyond which individual suffering becomes dehumanizing. At that point, the most honorable solution is for the person concerned to quietly exit the world. Ajisafe also writes about suicide caused by "provocation," in which case another individual is held responsible for creating the occasion in which suicide is committed. In such a case, the "provoker" pays an indemnity, part of which is used for cleansing rituals and appeasing the dead, after which the corpse is released to the family for burial. Even in this case, the corpse is not buried in the house, but outside, in the bush or sacred grove in order to prevent *akufa* (other deaths) because it is *iku gbigbona* (hot death). Some Yoruba communities, such as Idanre, Ondo, and Oka had, and still retain, special priestly offices charged with the responsibility of performing cleansing rituals and burying suicides whether or not they had been provoked (Adeoye [1979] 2005, 342; Olatunji 1978, 71).²

That the Yoruba generally consider non-elite suicide an abnormality could also be seen in the fact that the Yoruba language did not, and still does not have any single distinct word for suicide. The most common expression used to describe suicide is *se bi okunrin / se okunrin* (act as a man / prove ones manhood). This suggests that the ability to take ones life is the ultimate proof of masculinity. In this sense, female suicides, though rare, were also regarded as masculine, having crossed into the threshold of manhood by killing themselves. Another popular expression used to report suicide is *p'okun so* (hang by a rope). This also shows that hanging was quite widespread as a means of self-destruction. Another suicide method was poisoning (*je majele*), which was widely used by, but not restricted to, members of the elite. Stabbing and the use of other weapons of war for suicide were common among the military class.

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED SUICIDE

Much of the discussion that follows in this section is based on

Samuel Johnson's ([1921] 1966) *The History of the Yorubas*, the most authoritative narrative of pre-colonial Yoruba history. The examples cited here are from the Old Oyo Kingdom, not necessarily because Oyo practice approximated what obtained in other Yoruba-speaking areas, but because Johnson's *History* was essentially "Oyo-centric" and also because Ibadan, by the mid-nineteenth century, appeared closer to Oyo in terms of language and "culture" than to other Yoruba towns.

There were two types of high profile suicides in Oyo, and both were considered "honorable" if promptly effected (Johnson 1966, 55). The first was actually ritual suicide and it involved important state officials and titleholders (some of whom were part of royalty). These individuals had to die either on the accession of a new king or on his demise. The biological mother of the king-elect, for instance, was officially asked to "go to sleep" immediately after her son was called to be king (Johnson 1966, 63). This was necessary so that "there [would] be no occasion to violate any filial duty imperative on a son who is at the same time the king ... [and whose] majesty must be supreme" (Johnson 1966, 49). Upon her death, an official mother was appointed for the king. Again, the *Aremo* (Crown Prince) and a host of other title-holders had to commit suicide upon the death of the king in order to accompany him to the hereafter. These individuals were called *abobaku* (one who dies with the king) (Johnson 1966, 56).³

Apart from its ritual symbolism, this tradition also had very strong political undertones. All the important titleholders that were customarily required to die with the king were those closest to him and who had the freest access to his person. To make their lives dependent on the king's was thus to ensure the king's safety. And since they all knew their lives would end whenever the king died, they took great care to protect him from premature death. As a sort of "compensation," all of these titleholders enjoyed special privileges during the king's lifetime and could get away with very serious misdeeds. The most important of these functionaries was the *Aremo*, who was required to die with the King starting in the eighteenth century because it was suspected that, before 1730, some had been committing patricide to hasten their own succession (Law 1971, 28). From 1730 to 1858, the primogeniture rule was abolished in Oyo and successive *Aremos* ruled with their fathers,

enjoyed tremendous powers and privileges, and were required to die with them. The *Alaafin* was then succeeded by any of his remaining male descendants approved by the *Oyomesi* (Council of chiefs) (Law 1977, 78).

The second type of suicide was politically motivated and was "imposed," either directly or indirectly on public figures. The direct demand came in the form of political rejection issued to the king. A ruling *Alaafin* could be rejected by his chiefs (the *Oyomesi*) for tyranny, wickedness, or as a result of political intrigues or power struggles. This rejection was communicated to him by the *Bashorun* (Head of the *Oyomesi*) who presented the king with an empty calabash, or one containing parrots eggs, with the pronouncement "the gods reject you, the earth rejects you, the people reject you" (Johnson 1966, 173; Afolayan 1998, 22). The only option for the king after receiving this message was to commit suicide. In the seventeenth century, nine *Alaafin* were thus removed. This practice continued into the eighteenth century, culminating in the internal struggle between the *Alaafin* and the *Bashorun*, which destabilized the empire in the second half of the century. As a form of political control, the *Alaafin* also had the right to request any titleholder to commit suicide (Law 1971, 29). Moreover, one of the *Oyomesi*, the *Samu* was also designated an *abobaku*. Despite all these measures, it appeared the *Oyomesi* (Council of Chiefs) used this prerogative more often than the *Alaafin* did (Law 1977, 74).

"Indirect" pressures for death could be presented by harrowing circumstances of life where the individual concerned did not wish to compromise his honor or where he felt he was approaching a situation of public ridicule. Johnson narrates the story of the head chief of Apomu (*Baale* Apomu) who committed suicide when Oyo decided to attack his town during the reign of *Alaafin* Aole (1789-96) (Johnson 1966, 189). There was also the case of *Alaafin* Agboluaje who committed suicide when asked by the "over-mighty" *Bashorun* Gaha (his Prime Minister) to attack one Chief Elewi-Odo, who was his personal friend (Johnson 1966, 179-80).⁴

Where does honor come into all these incidents? In the first type of political suicide identified as ritual suicide, the titleholders required to die saw it as an official duty to their land and so concealed their personal distress at having to die. Clothed in their

best, they gave lavish feasts and gifts to people amidst funeral dirges and even supervised the digging of their own graves and made elaborate burial arrangements. After putting their houses in order, they retired to their inner chambers and went "to sleep." They were subsequently given burials befitting their ranks. Although their relatives mourned their exit, they were at the same time proud of their conduct. However, if it happened that the poison taken by the person expected to die did not quickly take effect (probably due to previous herbal fortifications — *ajesara*), close relatives had a duty of "finishing off" the chief, either by strangling or some other means, before sunset to preserve the honor of the family (Johnson 1966, 398). Such homicide was not considered as manslaughter or murder. In fact, it was presented, in the interest of the family, as suicide properly and promptly committed.

The idea of refusing to die as expected in a ritual suicide was simply unfathomable to the people. Many issues — of personal dignity, of family or group honor, and of communal equilibrium and spiritual wholesomeness — were hinged upon that death. To refuse to accompany a king to *orun* after a life of enjoyment, privileges, and immunities with him was seen as a great betrayal, and a social disservice, which might portend grave consequences for the community. It also bordered on dishonor and ignominy, not only for the individual concerned, but also for his entire family, compound or lineage, since many of the *abobaku* titles were hereditary. However, if any of the *abobaku* refused to commit suicide as expected and thus had to be executed, Johnson reports that "his carcass will be treated like that of a common felon and his house pulled down" (Johnson 1966, 173). To avoid this type of disgrace, close relatives did not hesitate to "dispatch" such faint-hearted individuals if they showed any reluctance to die. What is at stake here is thus beyond the individual. To die with the king as a titleholder was therefore considered honorable not only for the individual concerned but also for his family. The suicide anticipated a life of continued privileges and enjoyment as a royal consort in the afterlife.

Rejected kings who valiantly committed suicide were treated honorably and accorded decent and public funerals because they exited bravely without resistance. On the other hand, for a king to insist on living after having been rejected was also considered

disgraceful and ignominious. Nobody anticipated such an existence. The only record of this in Oyo traditions is that of *Alaafin* Karan, who challenged the right of the *Oyomesi* to reject him. He was subsequently killed in an insurrection (Law 1977, 77). Thus according to Ali Mazrui (1965, 11), "suicide becomes respectable when the life which it ends [had] at once aspired to great heights and [now] descended to such depths." Where a leader (or anybody for that matter) was not requested to die by tradition and had not been officially rejected but found himself in dire straits and deep dilemma, suicide could offer a means of escape, as in "saving" him the dishonorable task of attacking a loyal friend. And where a dishonorable act had already been committed, suicide also helped in face saving — of relieving one from the consequences of such conduct — or could even be restitutive. Thus considerations of honor and ignominy, either directly or indirectly were always lurking at the heart of many suicides, especially in high profile cases in pre-nineteenth-century Oyo.⁵

Suicide in Nineteenth-century Ibadan

Ibadan, in the nineteenth century, witnessed several cases of suicide not only among the general masses but also among members of the political elite. Fortunately, details of some cases are preserved in the journals of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) by mission agents that served in Ibadan and observed those events.⁶ From these and other sources such as J.D.Y. Peel (whose *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* [2000] is the fullest recent analysis of the socio-cultural character of nineteenth-century Yoruba towns), a typology of non-elite suicide could be constructed. This would enable us appreciate further the similarities and differences between elite and non-elite suicide. The first type of non-elite suicides were caused by despair from the harrowing experiences of life. Instances of this culminated in the several suicide cases involving slaves in the nineteenth century (Peel 2000, 69). Reverend J. Barber, for instance, noted from his Ibadan station on 10 September 1855 that nine of the Ekiti men captured by Ibadan as slaves hanged themselves rather than embrace a life of slavery.⁷

A second type of suicide was that committed out of anger, as a form of protest against what had been suffered by other people. This is suicide as a result of "provocation." Once the provoker was iden-

tified, he was tried and if guilty, was asked to pay an indemnity. Failure to do so could cost him his life (Peel 2000, 62). Reverend W.S. Allen of Ibadan, in September 1879, recorded a case in which a young widow committed suicide by hanging herself because she was not allowed by her late husband's family to marry his son (whom she liked) but was instead assigned to a relative she did not like. She was allegedly taunted by a family member who said: "Die if you may, you will never be his wife." The head chief of Ibadan confiscated their houses and would have killed the man who taunted her if the family had not paid a heavy indemnity.⁸

A third type of suicide was that committed to escape the penalty or shame of a socially disruptive act earlier committed. Principal among such "mean" acts was murder. In June 1879, Reverend Samuel Johnson in Ibadan recorded the case of a man who "took a large stone" and attacked his wife on the head in the middle of the night, left her for dead, and "covered her up carefully."⁹ He then went into the garden and committed suicide, cutting his own throat. Interestingly, the woman later revived.¹⁰ The link between homicide and suicide is also highlighted in Bohannan's (1967) African study.

From the tone of these periodic journals, one could detect pity and sometimes repulsion on the part of the mission agents towards the suicides. This was to be expected, given their religious bias. These records also suggest nothing of the "social honor and credit" mentioned by Ajisafe. Instead, this admiration was articulated by society in the case of elite suicide, which was considered heroic and culturally acceptable, as the rest of this article demonstrates.

John Iliffe (2005, 76), in his discussion of honor among the Yoruba in the nineteenth century rightly observes the prevalence of military notions of honor (although his work fails to give a comparatively adequate definition of honor). While this development was a function of the incessant wars and military conflicts that characterized the Yoruba region within that century, it also had an antecedent in the philosophy of the *Eso* in eighteenth-century Old Oyo. The *Eso* were the seventy officers that commanded the Oyo military force. Robin Law (1977, 74) calls them "seventy junior war chiefs, who acted as subordinate commanders of the army under the *Oyomesi*." Their concept of honor in war is reflected in the following saying:

Ohun meji lo ye Eso
Eso ja, o le ogun
Eso ja, o ku si ogun
 (One of two things befits an *Eso*
 The *Eso* must fight and conquer [or]
 The *Eso* must fight and perish [in war])

Eso ki i gba ofa lehin
Afi b"o ba gb"ogbe niwaju gangan
 (An *Eso* must never be shot in the back

His wounds must always be right in front) (Johnson 1966, 73)
 These *Eso* principles of honor became crystallized in the nineteenth-century period of intense warfare in Yorubaland. The idea was that an honorable military commander must not survive defeat.¹¹ Nowhere was this ethos of military honor demonstrated as in Ibadan, founded in 1829 as a war camp and from there metamorphosed into a powerful military state. Bolanle Awe (1964), Toyin Falola (1984) and Ruth Watson (2003) have studied nineteenth-century Ibadan politics and the details need not concern us here. However, a brief summary of internal politics in the city might be given. Political authority in Ibadan was wielded by a military oligarchy because the powerful warriors would not tolerate any form of autocracy. War veterans were put in charge of civil administration in the metropolis, while those still in active service led the Ibadan army to the various theatres of war in Yorubaland. Sometimes, powerful military commanders chose to head the civil administration at the same time, thus combining two duties. A distinguishing feature of Ibadan politics at this time was the opportunity it offered for upward mobility and social advancement. The idea of an ascribed status of royalty and its associated paraphernalia and practices were jettisoned in Ibadan. Merit was rewarded and a lot of young people with no royal pedigree were attracted from other Yoruba communities to come and seek fame in Ibadan. The result of this was that Ibadan politics was highly competitive, since there was, in principle, no restriction on entry at the lower rungs of the socio-political hierarchy.

Seniority in age was respected but from time to time young men who distinguished themselves on the battlefield were rewarded with junior titles from where they made their way up the

military ladder. The death or downfall of those holding more senior titles was thus a matter of great interest to those under them as their own promotion would be accelerated. This competition for titles among the warriors was so intense that many of them actually became casualties. It is also instructive to note that holding political office did not necessarily make a warrior wealthier. In fact, it increased his responsibilities and the material demands that would be made on him. What these men sought to achieve through political office or a chieftaincy title was therefore not wealth but honor, called *ola*. They wanted to win public recognition and social esteem. This *ola*, in the words of Karin Barber,

... was not wealth as such or power as such, but a total state of sufficiency and command over their social environment....

... What underlies *ola* is the notion of recognition, of being acknowledged as superior and of attracting admirers and supporters as a result (1991, 203).

This idea of *ola* was not peculiar to Ibadan. In fact, it was (and still is) a general Yoruba desire to have *ola*. The luster and influence that is in *ola* made it so desirable that people called their children names such as Olawunmi (I desire *Ola*), Olaniyi (*Ola* is esteemable) Olaleye (*Ola* is lustrous). What was peculiar to Ibadan (and in fact to other military states in the nineteenth century), was the idea that military valor and success in war could be an avenue to *ola* as reflected in a name like Akintola. In the previous centuries, vertical honor derived from rank and high status was epitomized by royalty, while horizontal honor was gained by civil distinction expressed in good character and management of a household (Iliffe 2005, 67).

Once a military chief had attained the peak of his career, he jealously guarded his *ola*, which actually was not just for him, but for all the members of his family and posterity. His compound (*ile*) thus became an *ile ola*. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the offspring of the early military chiefs consequently saw it as their responsibility to preserve the honor of their compound. And if any of these second generation warriors distinguished themselves in war in addition to his heritage of *ola*, he automatically became the target of envy and political intrigues as his success would begin to threaten others, especially his political seniors.

The first case of politically motivated suicide in Ibadan

involved Chief Lakanle, who was the *Otun* (Second-in-command) to *Aare-ona-kakanfo* (General Commander) Oluyedun of Ibadan in the early 1830s (Johnson 1966, 257; Akinyele [1916] 1981, 32-34; Morgan no date, 1: 78-80). It was the death of Oluyedun that created a succession dispute between Lakanle and Oluyole, his immediate subordinate. This degenerated into a civil conflict between the followers of the two chiefs. Oluyole's group gained the upper hand and he immediately demanded the death or exile of Lakanle. The latter, in typical *Eso* fashion, chose death by ripping his bowels open with a jack knife. This closely resembles the ancient Japanese custom of suicide by disembowelment called *seppuku* or *hara-kiri* (Fuse 1997, 213-50). Upon Lakanle's death, Oluyole promptly became Ibadan's head chief.

The second case of political suicide took place in 1877 and it involved Chief Aiyejenku, a war veteran who was much respected by the masses (Johnson 1966, 407-10; Akinyele 1981, 101-03; Morgan no date, 3: 114-17). His main offense was that he was bold and fearless, the only person who pointed out the excesses of the head chief (*Aare* Latoosa 1871-85). Because he was much older than the *Aare*, he deemed himself competent to give unsolicited advice and to criticize the latter. This, no doubt earned him the hatred of the *Aare*, who together with his supporters initiated a web of intrigue in which the older chief was caught. The occasion for this was provided by a succession dispute in Igbajo, one of the tributary towns of Ibadan supervised by Aiyejenku. He took a stand which the *Aare* and other chiefs immediately faulted. The result of this was that Chief Aiyejenku was systematically ostracized and his fighting men were taken from him, thus "stripping him naked," and on 12 February 1877 he was asked to die. He went home to put his domestic affairs in order, carried his gun and then blew out his brains.¹²

The third example involved *Seriki* Iyapo, a relatively junior chief (Johnson 1966, 410-12, 417-20; Akinyele 1981, 103-08; Morgan no date, 3: 30-33). Iyapo was a young warrior made popular by his military successes. He was also heir to the vast household and resources of the late *Balogun* Ibikunle, a powerful military chief and head of Ibadan's army (1851-64). Iyapo's possession of fame, military might, material resources and a heritage of *ile ola* made him a potential threat to all the senior chiefs especially the

Aare Latoosa. Describing the fame of Iyapo as demonstrated during his return from a military campaign, Johnson writes:

The joy, the excitement, and the enthusiasm attending the pageantry of this young man so moved the whole town that the like of it had scarcely ever been seen. While it stirred the envy of some to its very depth, it excited the admiration of others. Thus a young man was heard to say; "If I enjoy such a glory for only one day and I die the next, I shall be content" (1966, 395).

The *Seriki* subsequently became the target of an intrigue master-minded by his political enemies. He was stripped of his title and deprived of his fighting men. He was then asked by the *Aare* to die. He was said to have replied the *Aare* thus: "my father was an *Eso*, and like an *Eso* I will die" (Johnson 1966, 419). He promptly ordered his grave and coffin to be prepared, put his house in order, retired to his inner chambers and killed himself on 17 November 1877 (Morgan no date, 3: 33; Johnson 1966, 419).¹³

That the military chiefs in these three cases committed suicide rather than fleeing demonstrates their commitment to their own honor and to that of their family. Considerations of ones family honor were particularly instrumental in the choice to die as a martyr in order to preserve the family name. However, not all military chiefs in similar situations took the same path. *Balogun* Ajobo was a case in point (Johnson 1966, 384-85; Akinyele 1981, 80-86; Morgan no date, 2: 110-17). When he saw that he had been rejected by the council of Ibadan chiefs on 5 June 1870, he returned the war staff in his custody to the *Baale*, ordered his coffin and grave to be prepared. During the night, he fled the town and took refuge among the Ijebu, one of Ibadan's enemies (Johnson 1966, 385).¹⁴ Ibadan chiefs reacted by driving his remaining family members out of the town and his compound was set ablaze.¹⁵

Ajobo's choice to live also affected his posterity. Most of his slaves escaped and the freeborn soldiers under him sought out new patrons. Ajobo's compound thus became desolate (*ahoro*).¹⁶ Some of his descendants that later returned to Ibadan lived as nonentities. Even in the twentieth century, none of them could aspire to the most junior chieftaincy title. Their *ile* was no longer reckoned with in the scheme of things. It was the fear of this type of *ibaje* (negative reversal of fortunes) that made other embattled chiefs choose suicide over exile (Akinyele 1981, 84). To maintain the

honor and integrity of their *ile*; they were prepared to pay the supreme price. It is curious and ironic that Iliffe, in his book *Honour in African History*, saw nothing "honorable" in these high profile suicides but dismissed them as "victimization" even when he also quoted *Seriki* Iyapo's declaration that he chose to die like an *Eso* (Iliffe 2005, 76). While the demand for somebody else's death by a majority or by a superior authority might have appeared as "victimization," the agency of the subject in acquiescing should also be acknowledged especially where the option of exile was, either directly or indirectly, a possibility. It was only when embattled chiefs refused to flee or commit suicide that they were murdered, as in the case of *Iyalode* Efunsetan Aniwo. ¹⁷

Efunsetan was a very wealthy chief. She owned "some 2000 slaves in her farms alone exclusive of those at home. She also had her own captains of war and war boys" (Johnson 1966, 391-94). Most of the chiefs, including the head chief *Aare* Latoosa, had bought firearms and other war supplies from her on credit and so were heavily indebted to her. Uncomfortable about the financial hold she had on him, the *Aare* masterminded a plot which eventually led to her deposition on 1 May 1874. She was accused, among other things, of not being in support of Latoosa's war efforts. Efunsetan neither fled nor committed suicide. She sent various gifts to all the principal chiefs but this was to no avail. On 30 June 1874, she was murdered by two of her male slaves on the orders of the *Aare* who immediately appropriated her property and household. The fact that there is no record of any female chief that committed suicide in Ibadan history presupposes that masculine prestige might have also been a crucial factor in the choice of suicide by the male chiefs.

It thus appears that in the intrigues of Ibadan military chiefs and in their struggle for survival, their horizontal honor was often at stake. Once particular chiefs, irrespective of their gender, lost the respect of their fellow chiefs, it was only a matter of time before they were "stripped naked" — deprived of the respect and support of those under them. Therefore, it could be said that while their ascent to a high office was made possible by a proper harnessing and deployment of vertical honor, which Barber (1991, 203) has characterized elsewhere as having "people"; their continued stay in office and enjoyment of the pleasures that came with high status

depended greatly on their retention of horizontal honor. While these two expressions of honor were not mutually exclusive, astute leaders needed to understand which was relevant and had to be accentuated at crucial moments in their careers. The bid to maintain a balance between these sociopolitical altitudes created much of the strife discussed above.

Political Suicide in the Early Colonial Period (1893-1917)

While retaining some of its pre-colonial features, high profile, politically motivated suicide persisted into the opening decades of the twentieth century despite the colonial presence. Certain features of the early colonial period made this possible. First, the absence of wars meant a decline in the importance of the military class. There were no more battles through which men aspiring to high status could acquire fame and a vast following. In fact, many of the military titles went into abeyance while the remaining ones became honorific (Falola 1989, 51). New means of socio-political advancement now had to be sought. An immediate implication of this was that the title of the *Baale* (head chief) was now invested with more prestige than it previously had. This is not to say that the powers of the *Baale* increased vis-à-vis those of the colonial officials. As a matter of fact, the *Baale* suffered many indignities in the hands of colonial administrators. The British presence as a superior power superintending the affairs of the chiefs greatly reduced traditional authority despite the rhetoric of "indirect rule." Nevertheless, with the absence of wars, political authority became concentrated in the *Baale* title (Watson 2003, 89). This also meant that the *Balogun* title, which was the most prestigious Ibadan military title in the nineteenth century, now fell behind the *Baale* in terms of importance. Even then, the *Baale* could not pretend to any of the sacred authority traditionally associated with Yoruba royalty.

Deriving from this increase in the prestige of the *Baale* title was a "constitutional" problem created by the colonial situation. This had to do with the question of whether succession to the *Baaleship* should be from the *Baale* or *Balogun* line of chiefs. From 1851 to 1893, successive *Baale* came from the *Balogun* line.¹⁸ But when *Balogun* Akintola refused the title twice (in 1893 and 1895, thinking he would still have the opportunity to "carry his new title to

war") the succession passed to chiefs in the *Baale* line (Falola 1989, 51). The chiefs in the *Baale* line interpreted this as a constitutional amendment, which made them the only ones now eligible to succeed to the *Baaleship*. Meanwhile, their counterparts in the *Balogun* line (including the *Balogun*) were equally interested in the *Baaleship*. This situation fuelled a lot of succession disputes in Ibadan. It was not until 1946 that a formal constitutional amendment, which allowed the two lines to succeed in turn, was made (Adeboye 1996, 303).

It was therefore not surprising that the colonial administrators exploited the differences between the chiefs, pitting one group against the other. They meddled in chieftaincy politics and easily deposed undesirable incumbents while hiding behind the intrigues of the chiefs. In terms of the complexity and ruthlessness of chieftaincy politics, the first three decades of colonial rule were particularly murky in Ibadan. And because all eyes were on the *Baaleship*, the pinnacle in anyone's chieftaincy career, most of the ensuing crises surrounded the office and its incumbent. The latter now had to walk a tight rope, dancing to the tune of the colonial administration and at the same time looking up to his fellow chiefs for loyalty and support. And in return for their political allegiance, the chiefs expected the *Baale* to be munificent and to respond positively to their own demands too (Watson 2003, 89). Failure to satisfy both parties spelt trouble for the head chief. It is against this background that the politically motivated suicides of *Baale* Dada Opadere, *Baale* Irefin and *Balogun* Ola become understandable.

BAALE DADA OPADERE'S DEATH

Dada Opadere emerged as *Baale* in 1904 after a bitter succession struggle with *Balogun* Apampa. It appears that colonial officers eventually chose Dada on the advice of the *Alaafin* of Oyo (Elgee 1914, 24). During his third year as *Baale*, a civil agitation erupted against Dada which lasted about eight months (Akinyele 1981, 154). It was believed that Apampa (who had now taken the title of *Otun Baale*) was the one behind Dada's troubles. The latter's inability to control the rising tide of armed robbery during his reign was misrepresented as an indication that he approved of their activities (Akinyele 1981, 155). During the civil disturbance of 1907, *Baale* Dada was openly accused of patronizing robbers and of being

rude to his chiefs. People went about town singing abusive songs against the *Baale* and those loyal to him (Akinyele 1981, 156). He was eventually deposed by colonial authorities in December 1907. Contemporary observers, however, maintained that the accusation of theft was groundless. According to A.B. Akinyele, Dada's real crime was that he was "stingy and avaricious."¹⁹ The chiefs could not bring this up against him "because they were not better than him in that respect."²⁰ His deposition was supposed to be followed by exile at Abeokuta and a pension of £200 per annum (Falola 1989, 55). A few days after his deposition, *Baale* Dada Opadere committed suicide in his house at Ibadan.

The travails of Dada Opadere have been interpreted in diverse ways. According to Toyin Falola (1989, 55), the unresolved constitutional issue of succession made it possible for *Balogun* Apampa to continue to antagonize him. Falola (1989, 55) cites two failed peace missions that came from Lagos at different times to reconcile Dada and Apampa.²¹ G.D. Jenkins (1965, 82) also points to the disarray in the chieftaincy structure caused by colonial rule as being the root of the crisis, which invited further administrative intervention. Ruth Watson (2003, 58), on the other hand, while acknowledging the colonial factor emphasizes the agency of the Ibadan chiefs in "fomenting an unrest;" and this she relates to their nineteenth-century heritage of civil strife. All these interpretations are valid. The colonial factor played out in two senses: the "constitutional" problem mentioned above created a volatile situation which in turn paved way for the meddlesomeness of colonial administrative officers. Again, the penchant of the chiefs for intrigues actually fed fat on the uncertainties of the period and on individuals' lapses. But to these should be added the significance of the socio-cultural context in which rejection and other forms of political defeat were seen as constituting an affront to the socio-political integrity of ones family, and to ones personal dignity. These perspectives also apply to the remaining suicide stories.

BAALE IREFIN'S DEATH

Irefin's tenure as *Baale* (1912-14) coincided with administrative reforms being carried out in the colonial establishment, especially the application of indirect rule to the Southern Provinces. A new Oyo Province was created in 1914 with its headquarters at Oyo and

Captain Ross appointed as Resident. Under this new arrangement, the *Alaafin* of Oyo was created as the most paramount chief in the province and Ibadan, among other towns, was placed under him. This was a reversal of the nineteenth-century situation when Ibadan was the most powerful Yoruba state and it answered to no other power. The details of this new arrangement need not concern us here: that is the focus of a magisterial work produced by J.A. Atanda (1973) titled *The New Oyo Empire*. However, the implications of this for Ibadan were numerous. First, with the active support of Capt. Ross, the *Alaafin* began to meddle in the internal affairs of Ibadan, especially in the appointment and deposition of chiefs. This meant also that the *Alaafin* became an important factor in Ibadan's political equations. In fact, at the installation of Irefin as *Baale* in 1912, the "presence" of the *Alaafin* was ominously felt even though he was not there physically. The colonial authorities made Irefin to sign a document in which he publicly pledged his allegiance to the *Alaafin* of Oyo.²² Moreover, the ritual leaves (*ewe akoko*) that were used in the installation were reportedly sent from Oyo, meaning that Irefin owed his position to the *Alaafin*. Implicit in this was also the silent message that the *Alaafin* reserved the right to depose him. Second, the Treasury of the Ibadan native Administration was made to pay part of the *Alaafin's* salary.

By 1914, Ibadan chiefs felt they had had enough of the *Alaafin's* meddlesomeness in their affairs. They complained to *Baale* Irefin and together secured the services of one Obadiah Williams of Lagos to help them prepare a petition, which they sent to the Governor-general (Akinyele 1981, 177).²³ The petition contained three main issues. First was the interference of the *Alaafin* especially the manner in which Oyo had taken over Ibadan's dependent towns.²⁴ Second, they complained about the high-handedness of Capt Ross, who among other things, was in the habit of asking chiefs to prostrate in public to acknowledge him. Third, there was the issue of *Abese Balogun* Amida who had been deposed by the Ibadan council but who refused to leave the town or commit suicide (Akinyele 1981, 178). Ross' reaction to this petition was to blackmail the chiefs and get them to betray *Baale* Irefin.²⁵ The chiefs then sent a counter petition (without Irefin's knowledge) in which they dissociated themselves from the first one, claiming they had been

coerced by Irefin to affix their thumbprints to it; that the *Alaafin* was their father; and that Irefin was the "bad egg" in their midst. Colonial officials promptly seized this opportunity to present a good alibi with which to do away with Irefin. He was deposed on 14 March 1914 and sent on exile to his farm. Irefin lobbied to get permission to come back to Ibadan in February 1915. Immediately this was granted, he came back to his compound at Oke-Ofa; and there committed suicide on 12 February 1915 (Akinyele 1981, 179).

BALOGUN OLA'S DEATH

Of the three suicides examined here, *Balogun* Ola's was the most impressive by local standards. Ola was the last of the military chiefs that had actually fought in the nineteenth-century Yoruba wars. By the time he became *Balogun* in 1914, he was already the oldest chief in Ibadan. But he was not infirm. He was very vocal and fearless (Akinyele 1981, 186). He led the local opposition against the British and criticized most of their anti-Ibadan policies. Although colonial administrative officials had a long list of his "sins," his last act was to oppose the plan to make the Ibadan Native Treasury contribute half of the £4 500 salary of the *Alaafin* of Oyo.²⁶ Ola had never subscribed to the idea of increasing the status of the *Alaafin* at the expense of Ibadan.

Balogun Ola had gone too far in antagonizing the colonial authorities before he realized that the other council chiefs were not in his support. On 18 August 1917, he was deposed, purportedly at the instance of the *Alaafin* of Oyo, and was asked to prepare for exile. Ola's response to this was captured very eloquently in I.B. Akinyele's narrative:

The *Balogun* left the meeting at which he was deposed without any outward sign of distress. He got home and began to put his house in order. He called his family together and encouraged them. They made a great feast and began dancing as if having a "funeral wake." He was also going up and down in their midst, joking and playing with them. Just before dawn, he entered his inner chambers and "slept." When he was expected to come out and he did not, the people in his reception hall checked on him and discovered he had passed on (1981, 187-88 [my translation])

This act of *Balogun* Ola so much impressed Ibadan people that he

was called *Balogun Kob"omoje* (He did not spoil his name) and that has remained the name of his family and compound to date. In fact, an extra verse was added to his *oriki* (praise poem) in which he was commended for this act:

Balogun-o-b'omo-je, o kare
Omo Akin! O kare! Omo Eso!
Omo a m'erin-gun, omo a m'erin-so
Omo Oyinyin, a ke bi i wura
Omo Ogbagba la'gun ja
Orun rere o! (Akinyele 1981, 188)

Balogun, you did not spoil your name, you have done well
 Son of the brave! You have done well! Son of *Eso*!
 The one able to ride on an elephant; the one able to tether an elephant
 Son of *Oyinyin*,²⁷ he who shines like gold
 Son of *Ogbagba*,²⁸ victorious in war
 Enjoy your rest in the afterlife.

Moreover, the cause for which he fought was one with which most Ibadan masses identified though they lacked a voice with which to articulate those grievances given the helplessness of their chiefs. In this sense, Ola died as a "patriot."²⁹ Inasmuch as his death was a protest against British authorities, it was also heroic, thus adding to his honor.

Honor in Suicide

There is no doubt from the above accounts that considerations of honor played a significant role in the choice of suicide by the individuals concerned. This is particularly understandable when one recalls the nineteenth-century pattern of intrigue laced Ibadan politics and how those who lost out in political contests ended their lives. Paradoxically, the distinction in the colonial period was that there was no demand for them to commit suicide nor was there a threat of destruction to their lives or properties. In pre-colonial Ibadan, a rejected chief either had to commit suicide or flee the town (those who fled felt safer pitching their tents with Ibadan's enemies, particularly the Ijebu). If he neither committed suicide nor fled, he would be attacked, his family destroyed, his compound leveled to ruins, and his dead body treated like that of a common

criminal. There was no likelihood of this happening again during the colonial period because of the British presence. While colonial officers did not expect deposed chiefs to commit suicide, they were ready to arrange a safe exile for them. Therefore, that all three chiefs chose death meant that they considered it to be a better option than exile. Even Irefin, whose exile was to his own farm, killed himself. It is therefore clear that what was at stake was more than individual honor. These chiefs were interested in maintaining their own personal dignity as well as the name of their family / lineage. To them, it was better to die than face ignominy.

Perhaps, we should ask what situations were considered ignominious in the colonial period. First, political defeat was considered disgraceful. Second, life in exile was regarded as humiliating. Worst of all, was death in exile. In pre-nineteenth-century Yoruba history, there was no customary provision for "life after public office" for a rejected or deposed king (Johnson 1966, 173). Political offices were held for life and if for any reason (misconduct and political intrigues) a public officer was removed, the general expectation was that he should die, as the cases of the rejected *Alaafins* show. In the nineteenth century when exile became available as an alternative to suicide, it meant different things to different people. To first generation warriors, it probably did not represent much of a threat because they had all come from their various communities to seek fortune in Ibadan and had still not established deep social roots. However, to second-generation warriors who knew no other home outside Ibadan, exile became a serious burden. By that time, people had begun to inherit compounds (*ile*), whose honor they were obliged to defend and preserve.

Therefore, by the twentieth century, exile had become more uncertain than death. It signified alienation and a loss of identity whereas in death was the anticipation of reuniting with past ancestors, and leaving a good name for their posterity, which the choice of exile precluded. Exile also meant that an *ile ola* could become desolate. Moreover, there was the possibility that the posterity of the affected chief could be reduced to nonentities within the city. Society understood all these and that was why those involved in such high profile suicides were given elaborate public burials and their heroic departure even eulogized for the way they preserved the integrity and honor of their compounds. The less the resistance

offered by the individual concerned, the more "heroic" he became after death. Closely related to this was the desire to die at home, among ones own people. This is illustrated best in the case of Irefin, who, after having been exiled, took permission to return home only to commit suicide, much to the consternation of colonial officers.

There is also a way in which old age reduces the fear of death. The elderly in Yoruba thought are generally considered to be closer to the world of the dead than younger people. It was not therefore strange to find elderly people anticipate death by giving their children instructions on how they wished to be buried and generally putting their affairs in order when they felt that their end was imminent. Balogun Ola had the advantage of old age which helped him face death with a type of equanimity that was lacking in the other two cases. This calmness in the face of death also contributed to his popularity and to the honor of his household.

Honor was thus reflected in personal dignity (which could be enhanced by age) as well as in a good name. A good name in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not necessarily mean moral rectitude. The chiefs that committed suicide were neither morally better nor worse than their colleagues. They only bowed out when they discovered that their "music" had ended. Exiting when you were rejected without much fuss was thus considered honorable. But what the chiefs did not realize was that the times were changing. Ola's case was actually the last high profile suicide in Ibadan. Some of the other chiefs were beginning to see things in a new light.

Abese Balogun Amida, mentioned in Irefin's petition was a case in point. Although Amida had been rejected in 1914, he neither committed suicide nor went on exile. Instead, he secured the support of colonial administrators and was eventually reinstated. By 1919, he had risen to the position of *Osi Baale*, and by the time he died in 1929, he was *Otun Baale* (next in rank to the *Baale*).³⁰ However, Amida did not have a particularly good reputation locally. When he died, a contemporary local observer described him as "a sinister figure, who sold the political liberty of Ibadan to the *Alaafin*."³¹ While this may not be a direct indictment on him for not committing suicide, it does connote a disapproval of his actions. In Amida's bid to circumvent the Ibadan suicide equation and reinvent a new honor code for himself, he sought the friendship

of colonial officers and rendered to them duties, the results of which were considered detrimental to the welfare of the city. Amida ended up becoming "alienated" even though he still attained great political heights at the expense of his reputation. He thus jeopardized the honor accorded him within the Ibadan public but gained the recognition of colonial authorities that considered him "wise and loyal."³² Viewed from another perspective, Amida's case could be interpreted as a test case, which proved to all that it was actually possible to defy, with some measure of impunity, social pressures and honor codes that had long been held to be sacrosanct by the people.

"*Iku ya j'esin*," though a Yoruba adage, also had its equivalent in other African cultures. Iliffe (2005, 64) writes about the Falasha or Beta Israel group in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ethiopia, who in their fight for independence sometimes killed themselves or one another to escape capture, while declaring "It is more meritorious to die honorably than to live in shame." There were also other examples of political / ritual suicides outside Ibadan though with a different tenor. Colonial officers were always at a loss during such cases. In 1905, when the Alaafin of Oyo died, the *Eleshinoba* (one of the titleholders traditionally expected to die with the king) committed suicide despite the intervention of British officials. He chose not to "dishonor" himself by forsaking his king even though the British tried to convince him otherwise. Again, in 1946, after the death of *Alaafin* Siyanbola Onikepe Ladugbolu, the colonial officers actually prevented another *Eleshinoba* from dying. But his son redeemed the "honor" of the family by committing suicide in his father's stead. This event has been dramatized in Wole Soyinka's (1975) play titled *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Conclusion

One major fact that comes out of the above is that Western theories of suicide are inadequate in explaining these high profile African suicides. A look into the people's history and mores has revealed that heroic suicide was considered honorable. The individuals concerned were not seen as "victims" because they were part of a society that made suicide comprehensible. And, because of their agency in their own deaths, they thus earned additional honors. In this sense, death represented an effective way of boycotting

ignominy and also, to a large extent, of demonstrating elite masculinity. "*Iku ya j'esin*" thus meant for the highly-placed another shortcut to honor both in this world and in the afterlife. The weapons of self destruction used also reflected the mood of their times: in the eighteenth century, poison was used; in the nineteenth century, firearms and knives / daggers were used; in the twentieth century, poison was reverted to again.

This study has further shown, in practical terms, the linkages between vertical and horizontal honor. During the early colonial period, Ibadan chiefs needed to maintain these two manifestations of honor simultaneously. Their worth in the eyes of the masses was being challenged by the indignities they were made to swallow from colonial officers, while the respect due to them from their peers was compromised by the demands of a political system characterized by high-level intrigues, which were, in turn, exploited by British administrative officers. The "casualties" of these crises were the principal chiefs who still held on to their traditional notions of honor and ultimately paid the supreme price. Again, while the worldview that valorized political suicide remained unchallenged, there was little that could be done, even by colonial authorities to stop the practice.

It is also remarkable that while the Yoruba valorized political suicide, they frowned against other types of suicide among the non-elite. This is a reflection of the unequal significance attached to individual statuses even in the construction of social sanctions. The privileges of high status thus extended to matters relating to the occupiers' transition into the afterlife. Elite suicide was thus not regarded as a pollution of the community. Rather it had a redeeming value as the central issue was not just to "save the face" of an embattled individual, but to preserve the honor of an entire *ile* (compound), and to avert the disruption of the community's socio-political equilibrium. The stakes involved in elite suicide were significantly higher than those in ordinary cases, hence the disparity in the way the Yoruba handled the issue of suicide among these two categories (elite and non-elite) in the period of study.

Political suicide eventually died out due to an interplay of several factors. First, increasing conversions to Islam and Christianity by the political elite (and by others in the society) modified worldviews and suicide became seen in a different light —

as a sin against God. Second, new avenues of earning honor began to open up via western education, wealth from cocoa farming, and trade. Third, the gradual erosion of traditional authority, which characterized colonial rule, brought out the futility of suicide. Moreover, several political forces (from the regional and national levels) that gradually appeared on the local scene were beyond the control of the traditional chiefs. All these affected the people's attitude to suicide. Thus, in 1925, when *Baale* Situ, a Muslim, was deposed in circumstances similar to that of Irefin, he did not commit suicide but proceeded on to exile in Saki where he died seven years later of natural causes. His family also did not suffer beyond the initial stigma, which they later overcame. Again, in 1949, when another political agitation erupted against Chief Salami Agbaje the *Otun Balogun*, the issue of suicide did not arise at all. Agbaje used his wealth, his contacts, and his children (two of whom were lawyers) to fight his cause as he appeared before the colonial Commission of Inquiry, where he was justified (Adeboye 2001). By this time too, exile and deposition were not as ignominious as they had appeared in the early colonial period. "*Iku ya j'esin*" was thus a product of a worldview and culture that celebrated the deaths that refused ignominy, especially among the political elite.

Notes

¹ In this article, my emphasis shall be on the socio-cultural analysis of suicide within a historical narrative.

² The high chief responsible for untangling suicides and cleansing rituals in Idanre was (and still is) the *Ashama*. The rope used by the first suicide he untangled was a major "ingredient" used to conclude his installation rituals. Oral communication with Professor Abayomi Akinyeye, University of Lagos, 13 March 2007.

³ The list of the *abobaku* provided by Johnson includes: the *Aremo*; three princes with hereditary titles (namely, *Magaji Iyajin*, *Agunpopo* and *Olusami*); two titled men but not of royal blood (namely, *Olokunesin* and *Osi'wefa*), and eight prominent female officials (namely, *Iya Oba*, *Iya Naso*, *Iya I'Agbon*, *Iya le 'Mole*, *Olorun-ku-mefun*, *Iyamonari*, and the *Are-ori-ite*) Johnson (1966, 56).

⁴ Perhaps, one could also cite the exceptional case of Afonja in the early nineteenth century here. Oyo custom stipulated that a new *Aare-Ona-*

Kakanfo must commit suicide if he failed to win his first battle after installation. Thus when *Alaafin* Aole asked him to attack the impregnable town of Iwere-Ile, he masterminded a mutiny and turned the heat on the *Alaafin*. This act could be interpreted as a demonstration of Afonja's unwillingness to commit suicide in the event of his failure to capture it given the fact of Iwere-Ile's invincibility (Johnson 1966, 191-92).

⁵ Another popular proverb used to justify such suicides is: *Ori agba ree ya ju oju agba ree* (Ridicule is better endured after death).

⁶ For a discussion of the nature of those CMS documents and how to use them see Peel (2000, 1-26) and Oyemakinde (2001, 1-12).

⁷ J. Barber, Journal, 10 September 1855, CMS, CA2/0/21/11. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for providing this reference and the next one and for emphasizing the relevance of the CMS papers.

⁸ W.S. Allen, Journal, 28 September 1879, CMS, G3A2/0/1880-81/124.

⁹ Samuel Johnson, Journal, 10 June 1879, CMS, CA2/0/58/11

¹⁰ A fourth type of suicide was that committed by the aged or infirm though it was not always acknowledged as suicide. It is believed that elders knew the secret of ending their lives once they decided it was time to exit the world. A proverb used to justify this type of death among elders is: *Oo pe l'aye, O o ni r'are, ikan l'oo f'owomu nibe* (One must necessarily make a choice between longevity and a suffering-free life). Oral communication, Professor Rowland Abiodun, Amherst College, Massachusetts, October 2006, and Dimeji Ajikobi, University of Lagos, March 2007.

¹¹ In Ibadan, this was also interpreted to mean that even if the conflict was a civil one, an *Eso* must always seek to preserve his honor. Iliffe (2005, 76) is however, quick to point out that some commanders did actually survive military defeat in the nineteenth century. That was probably in their early days during which time they found solace in the Yoruba saying:

Mo'ja mo'sa, la fii mo akinkanju l'ogun

(The hallmark of a brave warrior is in knowing when to advance and when to retreat).

But by the time they became general commanders, it was more difficult for them to handle defeat (euphemistically called retreat). A few of those who survived defeat then could not return home but had to stay outside the town until another opportunity presented itself in war in which they hoped to redeem their dented honor. At such points, honor easily meshed with pride.

¹² Daniel Olubi, Journal, 12 February 1877, CMS CA2/0/75/35.

¹³ Rev. Daniel Olubi, however, recorded in his journal that he died on 11 November 1877. Daniel Olubi, Journal, 11 November 1877, CMS CA2/0/75/36.

¹⁴ W.S. Allen, Journal, 22 July, 7 August 1871, CMS CA2/0/19.

¹⁵ None of his family members was killed though. And after he fled, many of those who had benefited from his kindness in the past composed an "elegy" for him:

E pe ko lo

E pe ko lo

Ajobo Omirin

Olonje ko ya lu pa

Ko lo lo to.

(You asked him to go

You asked him to go

For Ajobo Omirin who fed us

Was not easy to kill

So it was good he left [alive]) (Akinyele 1981, 84).

¹⁶ The Yoruba especially prayed (and still do) that an *ile ola* (compound of those who occupy high rank) should not become desolate (*ahoro*), which was considered bad luck or even a curse.

¹⁷ The *iyalode* was a female chief in charge of women's affairs. She was usually a wealthy market trader and she identified with Ibadan military life by contributing ammunitions and armed slaves to the war effort, appointing an experienced soldier to lead them though she personally did not go to war.

¹⁸ Those who succeeded to the *Baaleship* in the nineteenth century were chiefs subordinate to the *Balogun*. No *Balogun* ever became *Baale*. Military commanders interested in the headship of the town took senior military titles such as "*Bashorun*" or "*Aare-ona-kakanfo*."

¹⁹ Kenneth Dike Library (hereafter KDL), University of Ibadan, A.B. Akinyele Papers. A.B. Akinyele to Rt. Rev. Tugwell, 4 February 1908. A.B. Akinyele is not to be confused with I.B. Akinyele though the two were brothers in Ibadan. A.B. was the senior, and a clergyman who rose to be Bishop in the Anglican Church. I.B. was the author of *Iwe Itan Ibadan*, and he later became the *Olubadan* (headchief) of Ibadan (1955-64).

²⁰ Kenneth Dike Library (hereafter KDL), University of Ibadan, A.B. Akinyele Papers. A.B. Akinyele to Rt. Rev. Tugwell, 4 February 1908.

²¹ This is corroborated in Akinyele's *Iwe Itan*, 156-57.

²² National Archives Ibadan (hereafter NAI), Iba. Prof. 3/10: E.H. Oke, Secretary, Ibadan Native Government, "Report upon the terms of the appointment of the Bale of Ibadan," no date.

²³ Watson however suggests that the petition might have been written by Herbert Macaulay (Watson 2003, 101).

²⁴ The towns were formerly Ibadan's vassals in the nineteenth century, which carried over a form of dependent relationship with Ibadan up to the colonial period until Oyo began to lay claim to them.

²⁵ Details of Ross' involvement in this "coup" against *Baale* Ireferin are contained in Watson (2003, 102).

²⁶ *Balogun* Ola's sins, according to the colonial authorities included: frustrating the attempts of the colonial government to get recruits from Ibadan during the World War I period, opposing land leases to aliens, making remarks that could bring down the morale of the people and disparage the colonial government during the war years, and seeking a letter writer to assist him prepare a petition against the *Alaafin*, the Resident (Capt Ross) and Grier, the District officer (Adeboye 1996, 143).

²⁷ This was probably one of the praise names of Orowusi, Ola's father.

²⁸ This was the native town of Orowusi, from which migrated to Ibadan in the nineteenth century.

²⁹ KDL, Akinpelu Obisesan Papers, diary entry for 29 August 1917.

³⁰ KDL, Akinpelu Obisesan Papers, diary entry for 18 July 1929.

³¹ KDL, Akinpelu Obisesan Papers, diary entry for 18 July 1929.

³² NAI, CSO26/14935: Resident Ross to Secretary, Southern Provinces, 2 May 1925.

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