

Our land & people

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OUR LAND AND PEOPLE

Part III — THE WEST

by

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CROWNBIRD SERIES

No. 33

Price: Threepence

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N S R
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Part III — THE WEST

by

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Ibadan's market places are among the biggest in West Africa.

OUR LAND AND PEOPLE

(THE WEST)

Looking at the map of Nigeria, one will see a strip of land in the south-west corner of the Niger, bounded on the north by the Ilorin Emirate on the south by the Lagos lagoon, on the east by the Niger and on the west by the Dahomey frontier, covering an area of about 49,000 square miles, with a population of 6,362,000. This is the Western Region.

Mystery still surrounds the origin of the people inhabiting this Region. Legends have connected the majority of them with the tribes of Nimrod, son of Cush.

According to one account, they were said to be descendants of Oduduwa, son of Nimrod, who migrated from Sudan to the West African Coast and settled at Ile Ife. Another account is that they were some of the Canaanite or Phoenician colonists left behind by the great expedition sent out by Necho, an Egyptian King, in 612 B.C. These Phoenicians, it was said, sojourned for some time in the southern part of River Niger. Still another story says that Ile Ife was the cradle of creation from whence all nations of the world had migrated; Oduduwa and his eastern hordes mixed with the "Dwarfish men", the aboriginal natives of Ife. It was suggested that in the conflict of the two races, the inferior tribes were annihilated or absorbed by the superior people from the east.

Whatever their origin, the similarity of languages and customs of the seven tribes inhabiting the Region tends to confirm that they are branches of one tree, not in the sense that they are descendants of Adam and Eve, but in the sense that they all have regard for and adore monarchical institutions. Unlike the Hausas, the Fulanis, the Nupes, the Kanuris and the Biroms in the Northern Region, with languages that have neither common origin nor affinity, or the Ibos, the Ibibios and the Efiks in the Eastern Region, who are by no means related in culture, custom or tradition, the people in the Western Region are not just ordinary neighbours. They have similar traditions and culture.

There are eight provinces in the Region. Six of them speak one language, intonations notwithstanding, and the other two provinces, Benin and Delta, speak six languages which are not altogether foreign to one another. The soul of community life in the West radiates round the throne of the Oba or the Obi or the Olu, who is regarded as a symbol of a sacred tradition in every part of the Region.

This is a common factor in the life of the people, and it suggests that each section of the Region still retains its individuality whilst the Region as a whole has not lost its common nationality.

But much as the people belonged to one origin and had almost everything traditional in common, theirs was a reign of terror. War, open or concealed, was their trade and plundering their pre-occupation.

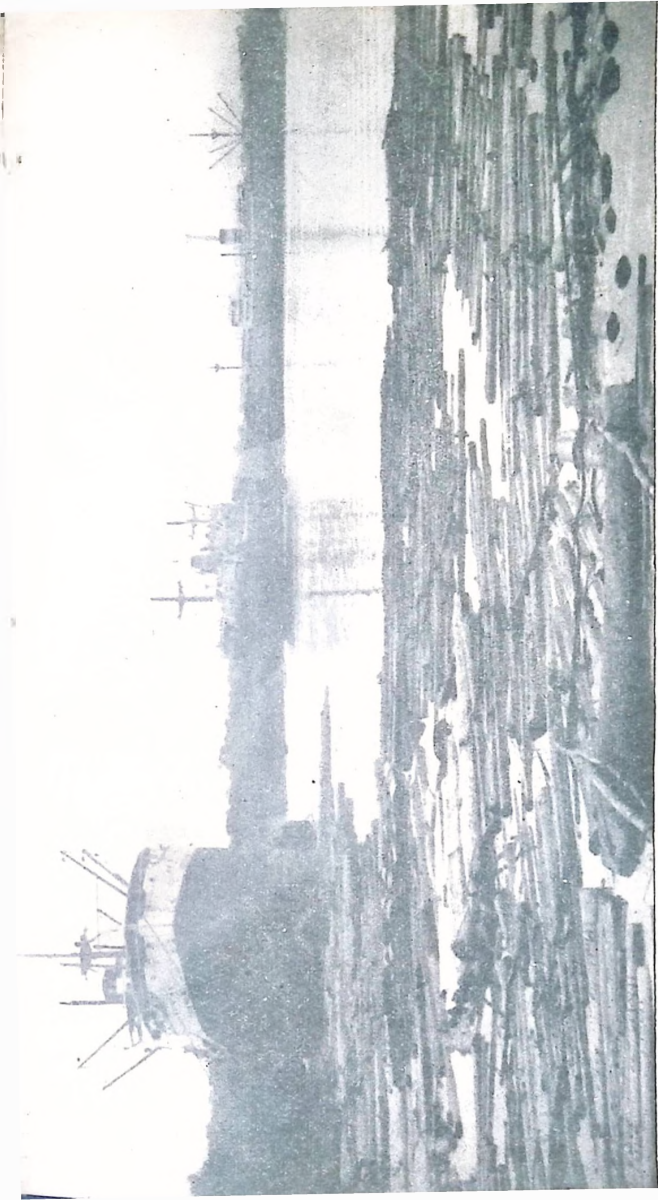
They waxed hot in factions among themselves as they mustered strong to beat Fulani invasion across the Niger. They very much disliked foreign rule over their land but they would not live in friendship with one another. They seemed to believe in the saying that "blood is thicker than water", but their quest for supremacy outweighed their sense of blood relationship. Such was the condition that whenever they had no external enemy to fight they waged wars among themselves. It was a period of might—brutish might—and only the fittest survived the ordeals of kidnapping and slave dealing.

Fernando Gomez and Ruy Sequeira—two Portuguese slave merchants were the first whitemen to arrive in the Region in 1472. They brought things like turkeys, ducks, pawpaws, pineapples and cocoanut—birds and plants which now play an important part in the life of Nigeria and took away human beings instead of palm-kernel and beads.

Benin was then a slave recruiting depot and Lagos was the chief slave port. The Yoruba word "Oba" (King) was used even in those far off years for the paramount ruler of Benin Province. The Oba of Benin sent his men to supervise the loading of slaves in Lagos (the men later on settled down and founded a town there) and sent the chief of Ugwato as his ambassador to Portugal in 1485 with another Portuguese trader, John D'Aveiro. Down to the year 1841 when John Beechcroft landed as the first British Consul in the Bight of Benin, and after, the slave trade was at its worst in the Region. Gezo, the then king of Dahomey, delighted much in it and gave the people of the Region more incentives to hunt for slaves even among their own children and relatives.

The British naval expedition of that year (1841) to Lagos helped to minimise the bid for slaves. Fortunately, one of the sons of the Region—Ajai, later known as Bishop Ajai Crowther, was one of the "ambassadors of goodwill" on the expedition.

Ajai, a native of Oshogun near Iseyin in Oyo Province, was sold into slavery. As one sent to prepare the way of peace for his people, he was lucky to be in the hands of English people who



Timber awaiting shipment at Sapele.

educated him and set him free. He contributed largely to the partial success of the expedition and enlightened his people about the Christian religion.

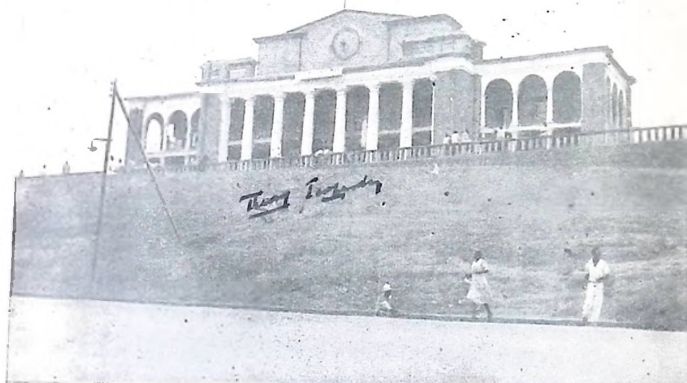
In 1842, Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman for the Wesleyan (now Methodist) Mission, arrived to "preach the Gospel". Reverend Henry Townsend for the Church Missionary Society followed him in 1843. Their efforts, though influential, could not stop the slave trade to an appreciable extent.

The tide however, began to change for the better when Lagos was ceded to the British Government in 1861 and the first British Consul—Benjamin Campbell was made Governor of the Colony. A new system of Government was introduced. Slave hunting chiefs were deposed and law-abiding ones installed. Lives and properties were protected and the people began to enjoy peace and good order. The British Government was then able to negotiate treaties with other towns and people of the Region. The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Commerce signed with representatives of Yorubaland in 1886 served as an effective deterrent to war-mongering and slave dealing, throughout the Region. More important still were the treaties signed with each principal town in 1893 in furthering the cause of peace and good government.

By that time, many slaves had been freed and repatriated. Their "Creole" life was magnetic. They brought a "new look" into the life and living of their people. The pursuit of slaves was being changed to pursuit of the way of the whiteman in religion, politics and commerce. Instead of engaging in inter-tribal wars, they began to seek a kingdom of peace and a better way of life. Their means, however, could not cope with the requisites of the new life brought to them. No more plundering, no more slaves, they had to depend on honest but hard labour. It was very difficult for them to readjust themselves to that. So they devised another way of obtaining comfort with less labour. The rich would increase his wealth and the poor would enjoy a better life. So the poor would "loan out"—pawn his children or junior relatives or himself—to the rich for some amount needed for marriage, or some other purpose. That semi-slave dealing continued for a long time in the Region. But throughout that long period to the present time, there has been a continuity of the people's desire for higher and nobler things of life, and in every age, one could notice in their living, traces of a fine culture that has not waned with the time.

Now let us see how the Region has progressed since it has become a Protectorate under the British rule.

As it has been said, a foundation for good government was laid and new systems of administration were introduced. But the



Mapo Hall, Ibadan.

greater part of the Region was accessible only by narrow bush paths, and lack of proper means of transit and transport from the interior districts to the coast (a problem still to be solved in some parts of Ondo, Benin and Delta Provinces) made dissemination of knowledge difficult, and retarded the economic development of the Region.

So, in 1896, the British Government began to build the railway. The railway started at Iddo, an island connected with the island of Lagos by a bridge (named Carter after Sir Gilbert Carter the then Governor) and crossed to the mainland over the Denton Bridge (seventeen spans of 50 feet each). It was extended, and opened for traffic, to Ibadan (120 miles away) in 1901. A branch line was later constructed, starting from Ifo Junction, to serve the western part of the Region.

By 1914, when the Northern Protectorate was amalgamated with the Southern Protectorate, the railway had reached Minna and joined up with the Baro-Kano line, and the dredging of Lagos Harbour had been completed. Inter-regional trade began, and large vessels from Europe were able to enter Lagos Harbour, thereby ensuring increased and regulated exports and imports of the Region.



Osse River Bridge.

As time went on, Lagos became the chief port, this time, for legal trade, and the bridge connecting it with the hinterlands became too fragile and narrow for the heavy traffic on it. Then the present bridge, 2,484 feet 2½ inches long, costing £36,200, was built, and opened by His Excellency the Governor, Sir Donald Cameron, on Thursday, October 22, 1931.

River transport services were being run weekly from and to Lagos and Sapele, calling at the principal towns on the coast, and between Forcados, Warri and Sapele. Movements from one town to another are now a matter of hours instead of days or weeks as they used to be in the past.

In the early days, communications were poor. Messages and letters were being carried by messengers, and in the African way, through sounds of beaten drums.

Now communications are better. There are Post Offices in the big towns and postal agencies in many parts of the Region. There are aerodromes at Ikeja (Lagos area), Ibadan and Benin City.

There is a wireless station in the Region at Lagos, and external communications are facilitated by means of air service and cablegram.

In arranging for the Region to be well governed, steps were taken to have maps made of each territory showing the exact places of towns and villages and boundaries between each of the adjoining towns. By that process, the whole Region was divided into, formerly five, but now, eight provinces including Lagos and the Colony area. Each province has its own treasury and power of administration under the guidance of the British Officers. The Head Chief or Oba of the province as guardian of the rights of the people and institutions is head of the administration. He with certain number of chiefs and elected representatives of the people constitute the Native Authority. Previously, So'c Authority was vested in the Head Chief or Oba who exercised absolute power over the province. But now, each province is split into divisions, each having its own council and local authority.

The new constitution has provided for each division to be fully represented in the Regional Houses of Assembly and Chiefs. Both in the urban and rural areas there are councils. Women are elected into local councils. Directly and indirectly, every adult male or female has some say in the way he or she should be governed.

Roads and bridges are being constructed and built all over the Region. Hospitals, dispensaries, maternity centres, schools and Government offices and buildings have been built and more are in

New river bridge in Ijebu Province.





View of Ibadan.

Carter Bridge, linking Lagos with the mainland.



the process of erection. There are at least, two hospitals and several dispensaries in each province. There is one Mental hospital at Abeokuta, an orthopaedic hospital at Yaba (Lagos area) and a leper settlement at Ossiomo in Benin Province.

The Regional Government aims at (1) the provision of at least one hospital in each political division (2) the appointment of hospital visiting committees (3) the improvement of training facilities for nurses, midwives and health staff (4) the introduction of a pilot health insurance scheme and (5) the encouragement of private practitioners' services. Already, a free medical service has been introduced.

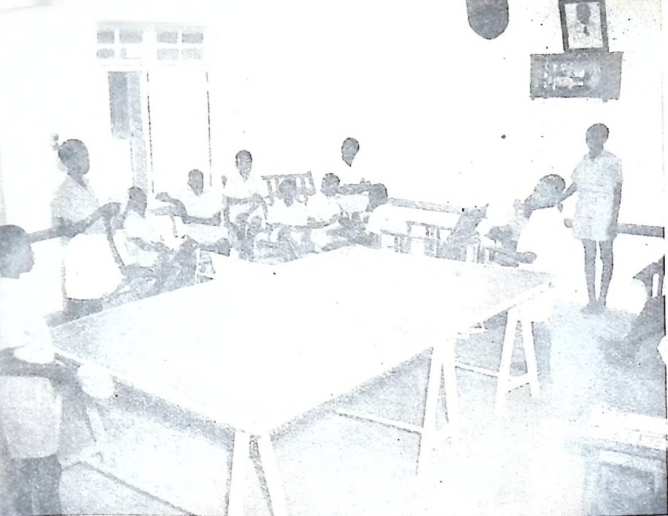
There are already 9 post secondary institutions, 49 secondary schools, 17 teacher training centres, 23 extension classes, 600 senior primary schools, 1,550 junior primary schools and 97 reading rooms in the Region.⁽¹⁾ Ten more secondary schools and eight technical colleges are being planned. The Regional Government is planning to make primary education compulsory and free in 1955. War has been declared against illiteracy and disease in the Region. The problem of social welfare in the Region is being tackled by the Regional Government. The Co-operative Movement is being encouraged. A Registration Certificate has been given to the Board of Management of a Co-operative Bank and Insurance in the Region. Efforts are being made to improve the agriculture in the Region so as to achieve a higher standard of living for the people.

The people are fond of work and are industrious. In the olden days, work—farming or warring—was all their concern. Everywhere, the motto was, "Business first". "Only lazy people", they used to say, "take to politics".

Until recently, many people would not take a title nor interest themselves in the affairs of their town or village lest their work should suffer. As a result of this nonchalance on the part of the rightful candidates because of work, some "easy life" people, who were by no means connected with chieftaincy, paved their ways to become chiefs, senior or junior, and to run the affairs of the state. It is not unlikely that this incident may be one of the causes of chieftaincy disputes which have been threatening the solidarity of community life in the Region.

Changes have come to many aspects of the people's life, but their devotion to work has remained the same, and it has even been more intensified now in the zeal with which they have applied themselves to education and a higher standard of living.

(1) These figures are accurate to June 1953 but more schools have opened since that date.



Youth Clubs are springing up all over the Region.

Farming is the chief industry of the Region. The farmer may be either a tenant farmer, who pays some sort of rent, known as "Ishakole" in Ife Division, on the leased portion or a *bonafide* landlord.

The palm oil and palm kernel industry is one of the oldest, most popular and most profitable of local industries. This industry is being encouraged now by the Production Development Board. Oil pioneering mills have been installed by the Board in the large palm oil producing areas.

As the Region is the largest cocoa-growing area in the country, cocoa is now one of the principal products, and the cocoa industry, being more lucrative than others, is the favourite of the people.

The Region also has the largest rubber and timber forests. Rubber and timber industries play an important part in the economic life of the people, especially in Benin and Delta Provinces.

From the view point of inter-regional trade, the Kola industry is an important one and it accounts, more than anything else, for the immigration of the Northerners to the Region.

Other native industries include fishing, canoe building, weaving, dyeing, pottery, basket weaving, masonry, smithery and printing. Hunting is partly an industry and partly an amusement.

Chief occupations are sewing, hairdressing, carpentry, motor and bicycle repairing, motor driving, load carrying, drumming and dancing and so on. Both men and women frequently tramp or motor many miles from their homes in search of more remunerative labour or for the gains of trade. Women traders are many, especially in foodstuffs, fancy work and articles of dress or ornament.

There is an army of clerks in the Region as well as many professionals—lawyers, doctors, nurses, midwives, surveyors and draughtsmen, journalists, chemists and druggists, clergymen and school masters.

The indigenous medical service has been recognised by the Government, and there are many Nigerian doctors and herbalists.

There are three religions—Christianity, Islam and Pagan religion. Although Christianity exercises much influence on the life of the Region, there are more muslims than christians. The pagan religion has both its spiritualistic and materialistic followers. The spiritualistic invoke the "spirit" into anything—image, cutlass, water, wood or stone to be idolised by tinkling a bell, drumming and dancing with

Village Industry. Rubber tapping.



Both in urban and rural areas, people began to demand some form of better living for themselves. Community development projects began to spring up. Although the initiative many a time came from the people, the necessary stimulus often came from the Administrative and Development Officers. Funds were made available under village reconstruction and town planning schemes. In many parts of the Region, people took advantage of Development funds. Roads, maternity centres or community centres were built and in the most remote places small improvements were made.

There have been remarkable improvements in trade and industries. Development in any shape or form has become the desire of the Region. And it is developing rapidly. But alas, vice and evil practices develop, too. There are as many tribal or cultural societies as there are religious or political unions. Some of these societies or unions assist in waging war against illiteracy. Some award scholarships or build elementary schools or community centres.

In the Region are found many towns of historical interest. With the exception of two—Oluwatedo and Fashole in Oyo Province, all the towns are more than 80 years old.

Here we find Badagry on the extreme West of Lagos, the first evangelised town in Nigeria; Lagos, the Capital of Nigeria and the "lighthouse" of Western civilisation; Abeokuta, first exponent of democracy in Native Administration, land of song and wine; Ijebu and Remo, home of great adventurers and industrialists; Ibadan, the capital of the Region, university town of Nigeria and centre of attraction; Oyo, custodian of Yoruba traditions; Ife, the archive of Yoruba arts; Ilesha, land of bravery and courage; Ondo, where simplicity commands respect and tolerance can be mistaken for docility; Akure, home of great hunters and agriculturalists; Ado Ekiti, where christian faith tends to dominate action; Owo, land of honour, noted for weaving; Benin City, home of arts, ancient Kingdom of power and awe; Asaba, an old military headquarters; Sapele, centre of the timber trade and Warri, land of the Itsekris.

Other towns which are by no means less important are Okitipupa, Okuku, Ota, Ilaro, Oshogbo, Ede, Ikirun, Ejigbo, Ijebu-Igbo, Ikorodu, Epe, Afuje Iwo, Ogbomoso, Ikare, Uniaja, Auchi, Uromi, Kwale and Aboh.

There are clubhouses, restaurants and Government Rest houses in each big town. There are Catering Rest houses at Ibadan, Akure, Benin and Warri.

The people take keen interest in sports and athletics. Physical training is encouraged. So, here is a sound Region of a sound minded people, virile and pushful, aiming at the nobler things of life.

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