



Origin of the Yoruba and “The Lost Tribes of Israel”

Dierk Lange

Abstract. – On the basis of comparative studies between the dynastic tradition of the Oyo-Yoruba and ancient Near Eastern history, the present article argues that Yoruba traditions of provenance, claiming immigration from the Near East, are basically correct. According to Oyo-Yoruba tradition, the ancestral Yoruba saw the Assyrian conquests of the Israelite kingdom from the ninth and the eighth centuries B.C. from the perspective of the Israelites. After the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C., they were deported to eastern Syria and adopted the ruling Assyrian kings as their own. The collapse of the Assyrian empire is, however, mainly seen through the eyes of the Babylonian conquerors of Nineveh in 612 B.C. This second shift of perspective reflects the disillusionment of the Israelite and Babylonian deportees from Syria-Palestine towards the Assyrian oppressors. After the defeat of the Egypto-Assyrian forces at Carchemish in Syria in 605 B.C. numerous deportees followed the fleeing Egypto-Assyrian troops to the Nile valley, before continuing their migration to sub-Saharan Africa. [*Nigeria, Assyrians in Africa, Lost Tribes of Israel, migrations, state foundation, conquest state, dynastic traditions, oral traditions, African king lists*]

Dierk Lange, Dr. Troisième Cycle (1974 Paris), Thèse d'État (1987 Paris); Prof. em. of African History, Univ. of Bayreuth. – Field research in Nigeria, Niger, and Libya. – Publications include books and articles on the history of the medieval empires of West Africa (Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem-Bornu) and on the history and anthropology of the Yoruba, Hausa, and Kanuri. – See References Cited.

1 Introduction

According to the present opinion, the Yoruba are of local origin, but this opinion reflects the great influence of postcolonialism on African historiography rather than sober text-critical research. It involves the fallacious dismissal of the major traditions of provenance suggesting an origin of the ancestral Yoruba in the Near East. In fact, before the rise of ac-

ademic African historiography in connection with the independence of African states around 1960, scholars relied more directly on the available traditions of Yoruba origin and they did some comparative research between Yoruba, ancient Mediterranean and Israelite cultures. On the basis of this evidence they suggested that the Yoruba immigrated from far away: either from Phoenicia, the Mediterranean world, Egypt, or Nubia (Biobaku 1955: 8–13; Lange 1995: 40–48). If any of these suppositions could be shown to be true and present opinion to be ideologically biased, it would mean that a culture of the ancient world survived in sub-Saharan Africa, which in the area of origin was superseded by subsequent sweeping developments such as Hellenization, Christianization and Islamization (Lange 1995, 1997, 1999).

Academic historians of the postcolonial period take a hypercritical position by pointing out several factors thought to invalidate the basic message of the traditions which formerly had been considered to be of minor significance. They emphasize that migration of the Yoruba was unlikely as long as people further north were not immigrants. They estimate that traditions of migration from the Near East were the result of an Islamic *feedback*, supposing that local keepers of traditions manipulated the historical data for the sake of inventing a prestigious history equivalent to that of Muslims and Christians (Fage 1976: 64 f.; Henige 1982: 81 f.). More particularly they accuse scholars who do not conform to Afrocentric attempts to reconstruct African history of following the so-called Hamitic hypothesis, which supposedly denies Africans the ability to found their own states. With little concern for the

available sources, they claim that any reference to migrations from outside Africa results mainly from the attempt to justify colonialism by projecting the colonial situation into the past (Law 2009: 297f.). Clearly such ideological preconceptions based on nationalistic historiography erect considerable barriers for any sober approach to the available historical sources. Moreover, they greatly inhibit any attempt to venture beyond the natural barriers of regional studies and they create enormous obstacles for the integration of Africa into world history in ancient times.

1.1 Migration from the Near East and the Foundation of the Sahelian States North of the Yoruba

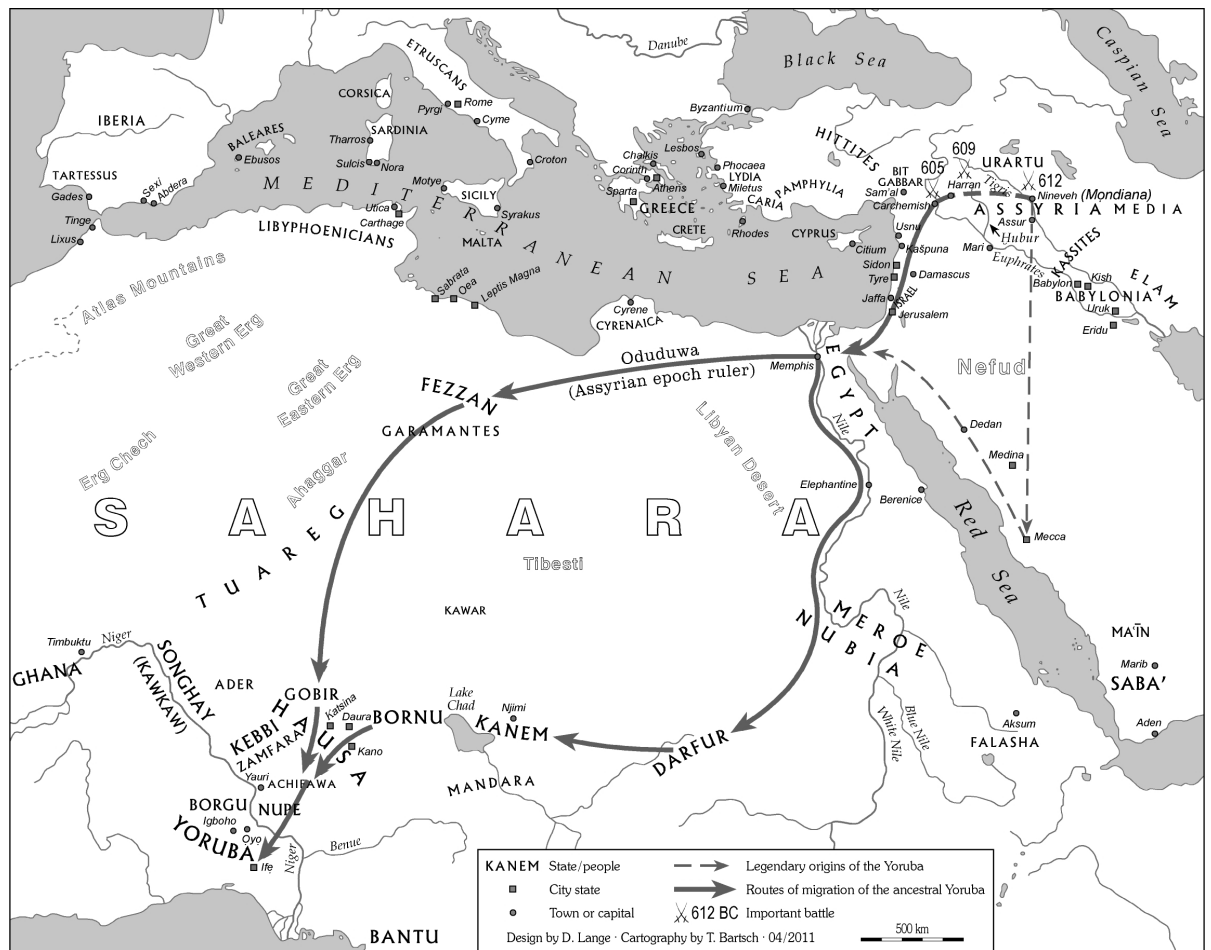
From the ninth century A.D. onward, numerous Arab authors provide information on African states south of the Sahara obtained from Arab and Berber traders who had visited them. Most of these authors were geographers with little interest in history. A great exception is al-Ya'qūbī, the earliest of the three most important historians of the Arabs, who was born in Iraq and finished his acclaimed *Ta'riḫ* in 873 in Khurasan. It is very fortunate for African history that al-Ya'qūbī had a global view of mankind, far transcending the Islamic horizon. After relating the history of the biblical patriarchs and that of the ancient world, he continues with India and China, and then turns his attention to sub-Saharan Africa, beginning his account with a great migration:

The people of the progeny of Hām, son of Noah, left the country of Babel, went to the west, crossed the Euphrates, continued to Egypt and thence moved to East and West Africa. West of the Nile the Zaghawa settled in Kanem, next the Hausa (text: ḤWDN), then the Kawkaw and finally the people of Ghana (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981: 21).

Historians tend to discard this information as fictive because it seems to press all early human history into the mould of descent from Noah. However, it can be shown that al-Ya'qūbī was too dedicated to facts to manipulate the history of African people by inventing ex nihilo details of an early migration in order to make it fit the preconceived idea of biblical descent. Most likely he relied in this case on information obtained from travelers who had visited the Sahelian kingdoms themselves. In fact, two other writers, Ibn Qutayba in the ninth century and al-Mas'ūdī in the tenth, echo similar partly inde-

pendent traditions (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981: 15, 31).

Today the court historians of these surviving kingdoms still relate stories of early migrations. This is the case in Kanem-Bornu, where the dynastic hero is said to have migrated with his people from Baghdad to Yemen and hence to the region of Lake Chad (Lange 2010b: 89–93; 2011b: 3–10). In the central Hausa state of Daura, the great national tradition claims that the bulk of the people came from Syria-Palestine and that the leader originated from Baghdad (Palmer 1928: 132f.; Lange 2004: 289f.). Further to the west, in Kebbi traditionalists relate the story of a legendary hero who departed from a town in the Near East and continued with his followers via Egypt and Fezzan to the present locations of the people (Lange 2009: 363–366). The heroes of these and other stories of migrations can in some cases – such as Kanem and Kebbi – be identified with the great Mesopotamian empire builder Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279), who mutated into an epoch hero, incorporating into his figure several, later ancient Near Eastern kings, and finally even leading his people to West Africa. In other cases, the hero of the migration corresponds to the Assyrian refugee king, Assur-uballit II (612–609). From the Babylonian Chronicle we know the major details of the fall of the Assyrian Empire: the defeated crown prince fled with his troops from the conquered city of Nineveh, was crowned as the last king of Assyria in Harran in Syria, and got military support from the Egyptians, but he became so insignificant that the Chronicle omits any mention of him in connection with the crushing defeat of the Egyptian troops at Carchemish in 605 B.C. (Grayson 1975: 94–99; Oates 1991: 182f.). Assur-uballit II figures prominently in several West African traditions: the great Hausa legend of Daura calls him after his second name Bayajidda (*uballit* > *baya-jidd(a)*), relates his flight with half of the royal troops from “Baghdad” (as an actualization of Nineveh), traces his migration to Bornu (for Egypt) where the king of Bornu lent his troops little by little for his own benefit, until the hero finally travelled alone on his horse to Daura in Hausaland, where he killed the dragon, married the queen, who had earlier immigrated with her people from Syria-Palestine, had children with her, and thus became the founder of the seven Hausa states (Palmer 1928: 133f.; Lange 2004: 290–295). According to the original version of the written reports of Kanem, the leader of the great migration via Egypt and Fezzan was Arku, a name which due to its Akkadian meaning, “the second,” seems to designate Assur-uballit II (Lange 2011b: 17f.). Hence, the tradi-



Map: The great migration of refugees from the collapsing Assyrian Empire c. 605 B.C. according to Yoruba tradition.

tions of major states situated north of the Yoruba refer to a great migration of state builders from the Near East, in which the heroic leader bears either some form of the name of the greatest Mesopotamian empire builder Sargon of Akkad, venerated in particular by the Sargonic kings of Assyria, or some form of the name of Assur-uballit II, the last king of Assyria.

Onomastic evidence, derived from Arabic dynastic accounts initiated by earlier Hebrew or Aramaic writings, confirms the validity of the orally transmitted migration legends. For the Near Eastern background of the history of Kanem, we have the king lists and the *Dīwān*, a chronicle in Arabic based on an earlier chronicle written in Hebrew which can be shown to present a *condensé* in the form of a short king list dealing with the origin of the state builders of Kanem (Lange 1977: 66f.). Beginning with the figure heads of the three major states of the Fertile Crescent – Sēf/Sargon of Akkad, Ibrāhīm/Abraham of Israel, Dūkū/Hammurabi of Babylonia –, it continues with four kings

standing for the Neo-Assyrian expansion: Fune/Fūl (Tiglath-pileser III) and three other kings representing Urartian, Elamite, and Hittite deportees; it ends with two kings indicating the fall of the Assyrian Empire. These last kings of the ancient prehistory of Kanem are Bulu/Nabopolassar (626–605) and Arku/Assur-uballit II (612–609). The insertion of Nabopolassar, the Babylonian conqueror of Assyria, into a king list that otherwise reflects a pro-Assyrian view of the ancient Near Eastern prehistory of the state founders of Kanem can be explained by the ambiguous attitude of the different refugee communities of deportees towards the Assyrian state. On one hand they were indebted to the Assyrian leadership for their admission to high positions of the Assyrian state and army, but, on the other hand, they considered the Assyrian elite as their oppressors and accordingly hailed the Babylonian conquerors. By introducing the name of the Babylonian conqueror between the names of kings representing the communities of Assyrian deportees and the last Assyrian king, the ancient chronicler provides in onomastic

form a fairly accurate glimpse of the fall of Assyria (Lange 2011b: 17 f.).

Evidence derived from the king list of Kebbi confirms the validity of this analysis based on onomastic material from Kanem-Bornu sources. Just as the early part of the *Dīwān* corresponds to the Arabic translation (and adaptation) of a Hebrew chronicle, the pre-Islamic part of the king list of Kebbi represents the Arabic translation of an Aramaic king list. Though including 33 royal names and being, therefore, much more extended than the Near Eastern part of the *Dīwān*, it has similar sections and refers also to deported people such as Kassites, Babylonians, Elamites, Urartians, Hittites, Arameans, and Israelites. Moreover, by the arrangement of royal names its second section offers a *précis* of the crucial period of empire-founding by Sargon of Akkad. Its last section, beginning likewise with Fumi/Fûl (Tiglath-pileser III), mentions some supplementary Neo-Assyrian kings and ends, like the *Dīwān*, chronologically exactly with the Babylonian conqueror of Assyria and the Assyrian refugee king, called in this case Maru-Tamau/Nabopolassar (626–605) and Maru-Kanta/Assur-uballit II (612–609) (Lange 2009: 369–375). Therefore, it can hardly be doubted that Kanem and Kebbi – and several other great states north of the Yoruba – were founded by refugees from the collapsing Assyrian empire comprising a few Assyrians and numerous deported communities settled in the western provinces of the Empire. They were pushed westward to Syria by the advancing Babylonian – and Median – troops, where together with their Egyptian allies they were defeated in the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. and hence fled in the tracks of their allies to Egypt and thence to West Africa (Lange 2010a: 105–107).

A word should be said about the Israelite component of these ancient Near Eastern immigrants. Though numerically the Israelites from the northern state seem to have been weak, their cultural influence was considerable. In Kanem, the dynastic hero Sef/Sargon is credited with descent from the biblical patriarchs, beginning with Adam and ending with Abraham, and the unity of the different immigrant and local clans was ensured by a national shrine, the Mune/Manna, which the Imam Ibn Furū claims to be identical with the Sakina of King Saul (Lange 2006; Seow, ABD/I: 386–393). In Daura the great Hausa tradition traces the origin of the seven Hausa states, on the pattern of the Abrahamic scheme of descent, from a figure equivalent to Isaac, but in this case turned into a son of the Canaanite queen Magajiya/Sarah and the Assyrian refugee king Assur-uballit II/Bayajidda (instead of Abraham). By contrast, the seven non-Hausa states are said to be de-

scended from the son of the slave maid of the queen, Bagwariya/Hagar, offered by the queen to the hero, just as Hagar was offered by Sarah to Abraham. She gave birth to a son equivalent to Ishmael, the ancestor of the twelve Arab tribes, who in turn engendered the ancestors of the seven non-Hausa states (Palmer 1928: 134; Lange 2004: 294 f.). In the context of deportees from the northern Israelite state alone, the number of twelve appears to have been reduced to seven, and the contrast between the two sets of seven states seems to distinguish between Israelite and non-Israelite state founders from among immigrant Assyrian deportee groups.¹ In Kano, the greatest town of Hausaland, the equivalent of the Ark of the Covenant – called in this case *Cukanal Sakina* – was destroyed in the wake of the Fulani Jihad at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Palmer 1928: 116, 127; Last 1980: 172). Other important remnants of Israelite culture can be traced in the Hausa states of Katsina, Biram and Kebbi (Palmer 1926/7: 221 f.; Lange 2009: 374). Owing to postcolonial Afrocentrism, they have not yet attracted the attention they deserve.

1.2 Yoruba Traditions of Migration from the Near East

The Yoruba live in a tropical region too far south of the Sahara to have come to the note of medieval Arab geographers. Although now considered as a single “tribe” or people, in precolonial times the Yoruba did not form a political unit, but comprised many separate states in what is now southwestern Nigeria. “Yoruba” was an alternative name for the largest and most powerful of these states, Oyo, in the north. The name was extended in the second half of the nineteenth century to the entire linguistic and cultural group claiming a common origin from Ile Ife, the site of a remarkable myth of creation (Bascom 1969: 9–11). Therefore, the few remarks on the Yoruba occurring in writings of African scholars of the Sudanic belt from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century refer solely to the kingdom of Oyo and not to all Yoruba-speaking people (Hodgkin 1975: 156).

The first and only Sudanic author to provide precise information on the origin of the Yoruba is Muhammad Bello, the son of the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate and his later successor. In his “*Infāq al-*

¹ The notion of seven – northern Israelite – tribes seems to be based on the omission of the tribes of Simeon, Judah, Benjamin, Levi, and Ruben (Jeansonne, ABD/VI: 26; De Geus, ABD/III: 1034 f.; Spencer, ABD/IV: 294; Oller, ABD/V: 693).

mayṣūr,” written in 1812, he included a brief account of Yoruba origins, stating that

the Yoruba were remnants of the Canaanites of the tribe of Nimrūd who were expelled from Iraq by Yaʿrub b. Qaḥṭān and who fled to the west before they proceeded via Egypt and Ethiopia until they came to Yoruba (Bello 1964: 48; Arnett 1922: 16).

On the basis of the hypercritical Islamic *feedback* theory most historians nowadays doubt the validity of claims postulating Near Eastern origins. They believe that under the influence of Islam African keepers of traditions made up allegations of migrations from the Near East in order to insert the history of their own people into what they saw as the mainstream of historical developments (Fage 1976: 64 f.; Henige 1982: 81 f.). However, more recently it has been suggested that an Arab-Islamic overlay of these traditions resulting from an *interpretatio Arabica* tried to adapt a previous indigenous tradition to Arab-Islamic notions of geography and history (Lange 2008; 2011b: 5). In particular, certain names of the indigenous tradition seem to have been equalized with figures known from Arab historiography in order to increase the comprehensibility of the tradition. Thus, the biblical name Nimrod – also known from other Central Sudanic traditions – may since ancient times have been an *interpretatio Hebraica* for the great Mesopotamian empire builder Sargon of Akkad, known in Kanem-Bornu as Sef, in Daura as Najib, in Kebbi as Kanta, in Songhay as Qanda, and in Yorubaland as Okanbi.² The other figure mentioned by Bello, Yaʿrub b. Qaḥṭān, said to have expelled the Yoruba from Iraq, was probably chosen from among the ancient kings of the Yemenites on account of accidental homophony. This choice of a name is, however, not purely arbitrary, since the early Yemenite kings of the Arab historians can be shown to correspond to a combined tradition reflecting southern Arabian and Assyrian history (Lange 2011c). According to Arab historians, Yaʿrub b. Qaḥṭān was the second king following Qaḥṭān/Yoktan, son of Eber, and on account of his name he was thought to have been the first Arabic speaker among these kings (al-Yaʿqūbī 1960/I: 195; Ibn Qutayba 1960: 627). Though it is quite unlikely that expelled people would adopt the name of their conqueror, in the context of an expulsion from Mesopotamia his name could reflect reminiscences of Nabopolassar, the Babylonian conqueror of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Mentioned instead of Qranyan/Jacob in

some Yoruba accounts of creation, the name Yoruba itself is, however, more likely to have been derived from the name of Jeroboam, designating the founder of the northern Israelite kingdom (Bowen 1857: 266). Bello mentions further the settlement of kindred refugees in the hill country – presumably south of Sokoto – and in the town of Yauri, people who have traditions of origin bearing great similarities to those of the Oyo-Yoruba (Hogben and Kirk-Greene 1966: 256–260). From the reading of the other traditions of origin recorded by Bello, it appears that the author credits with Near Eastern origins only those people whom he highly respects, such as his own Fulani, the Kanuri of Kanem-Bornu, and the Yoruba. He denies such provenance to those people he looks down upon, such as the Hausa, who had recently been subjected by the Fulani, although the Hausa themselves hold such a tradition – which he mentions without any reference to their prestigious origins. It is difficult to think of any reason why Bello – or other scholars before him on whom he relies – should have invented a tradition of Near Eastern origins to flatter people with whom he had nothing in common.

Apart from Muḥammad Bello, the dynastic tradition transmitted by bards of the royal court of Oyo likewise traces the origin of the Yoruba to the ancient Near East. According to the version of the tradition recorded by the Yoruba scholar Samuel Johnson in 1895, the ancestral Yoruba lived in Mecca and their king was Nimrod. Braima, i.e., Abraham, instigated a revolt against the polytheistic regime of Nimrod in the course of which Nimrod was killed. Thereupon Oduduwa, the son of Nimrod, fled with his followers and the idols to Africa and left en route some kindred people such as the Kanuri of Kanem-Bornu and the people of the Hausa kingdoms of Gobir. He settled with his people in Yorubaland, where he founded the holy city of Ile Ife (Johnson 1921: 3–5). Details of the story show evidence of extensive borrowing from Arabic sources (al-Ṭabarī 1989: 49–61; al-Kisāʿī 1978: 136–150). However, under the layer of the interpretative Arab story we find some elements of an authentic tradition: though not necessarily in Mecca, the ancestors of the Yoruba once lived in the Near East; called by the biblical name Nimrod, their ancestral king was killed in the course of a popular uprising; his son Oduduwa fled with many people, some of whom settled en route to later Yorubaland. Considering the traditions of people on the possible route of migration between Syria-Palestine, Darfur, and the region of Lake Chad, we find ample references to countries of provenance and ancient figures belonging to the history of the Fertile Crescent (Lange 2011a).

² Levin (2002: 359 f.); Palmer (1928: 133); Lange (2004: 252, 505); Johnson (1921: 7).

In a recent and more faithfully recorded version of the dynastic tradition of Oyo, the original town of the ancestral Yoruba in Arabia is not called Mecca but Mōndiana. Independently from Johnson the Oyo prince Aḍeyemi wrote in 1914 that the Yoruba together with their northern neighbors, the people of Borgu, originated from Medina (Falḷa and Doortmont 1989: 313). One might think that both towns, Mecca and Medina, are mentioned in Yoruba traditions simply because they had come to the note of the people in consequence of pilgrimages by their Muslim neighbors. This is only true to the extent that the geography of the Near East was reduced in the minds of landlocked Africans to those towns frequently mentioned in oral accounts. However, from recent recordings of the royal traditions of Oyo it appears that neither Mecca nor Medina was the name retained by the tradition for the original home town, but Mōndiana. The royal bards of Oyo distinguish Mōndiana from Medina and they clearly localize the town “beyond Mecca” (Moraes Farias 1990: 121 f.). Such a designation of the place of origin of the Yoruba comes close to the tradition of provenance of the Kabawa, localizing the original home of the people in a town called Madayana not yet accommodated to Arab notions of Near Eastern geography (such as Baghdad or Yemen) (Lange 2009: 364; HALAT/II: 521). Both Mōndiana and Madayana seem to be names derived from the Aramaic designation *madīnah* “town, city” referring to a great city of Mesopotamia. Similarly, several biblical authors mention Nineveh by the generic Hebrew term *îr* “city”.³ In the Yoruba and Kebbi tradition, the two designations could, therefore, refer to the great city of Nineveh that was left by the crown prince with his followers after a major disaster.

In the context of a general reevaluation of the ancient history of the Central Sudan it appears that the theory of a migration of the ancestral Yoruba from Mesopotamia is in line with the history of their northern neighbors in the Niger-Chad region. This theory does not postulate a massive migration of people from the Near East at an undetermined moment in time, but repercussions from the fall of the Assyrian Empire and the subsequent defeat of the Egypto-Assyrian army in 605 B.C. (Saggs 1984: 120 f.; Oates 1991: 182 f.). There is nothing improbable in the idea that these decisive events are reflected in the traditions of people whose ancestors seem to have fled in great numbers to West Africa. Thus the parallel Hausa and Yoruba traditions, mentioning the death of the last great king in the ancestral

capital, refer in all likelihood to the death of Sin-shar-ishkun in his palace in Nineveh (Palmer 1928: 133; Johnson 1921: 4). His son, called Bayajidda or Oduduwa, fled to West Africa after the death of the king with the remnants of the people, an event apparently corresponding to the retreat of Assur-uballit II, the son of Sin-shar-ishkun, with the remnants of the army, first to Harran in Syria, 380 km away from Nineveh, and later – in the tracks of the fleeing Egyptian allies – to the Nile valley and possibly beyond. The written dynastic lists of Kanem and Kebbi in the Central Sudan record these events more soberly by simply mentioning at the end of the list of ancient Near Eastern kings the names of the Babylonian conqueror of Nineveh, Nabopolassar (called either Bulu or Maru-Tamau), and that of the Assyrian refugee king Assur-uballit II (called Arku or Maru-Kanta). As for al-Ya‘qūbī, his brief account of the great migration of West African people starting from Babylon relies probably on West African oral traditions reported by Arab traders, which in his time might have been more detailed than now. In his case, the name of the famous Babylon seems to have been substituted for the largely forgotten Nineveh. In view of the elite orientation of traditions, it is not surprising that the surviving oral accounts in West Africa insist on the Assyrian leadership and its defeat in the Mesopotamian capital. By contrast, they largely neglect the origin of the bulk of the refugees from foreign deportee communities established by the Assyrian authorities in Syria-Palestine (though the Hausa legend clearly distinguishes between the first settlement of people from Syria-Palestine and the later arrival of Bayajidda/Assur-uballit II himself). Pointers to these deportee communities are provided by the onomastic evidence in the Central Sudanic king lists. Apart from exiled Israelites, the available royal names refer also to Babylonians, Assyrians, Elamites, Kassites, Urartians, Hittites, and Aramaeans (Lange 2009: 369–375; 2011b: 13–18). Moreover, it appears from the traditions of Kanem-Bornu, Hausaland, and Yorubaland that, although numerically not very important, the Israelites had the greatest cultural influence of all the different national groups which found their way to West Africa.

1.3 The Dynastic Tradition of Oyo as an Outline of Israelite-Assyrian History

Consisting of lengthy well-conceived royal poems, the dynastic tradition of the Oyo-Yoruba enumerates after the account of the origin the names and feats of 29 kings who ruled before the Fulani Jihād

³ Gen 10:12; Jon 1:2; 3:3; 4:11; Jth 1:1; Grayson, ABD/IV: 118 f.; HALAT/II: 521; Lange (2009: 363 f.).

beginning in 1804 (Johnson 1921: 187; Hess 1898: 130–173). Although there is no synchronism for any of these kings, it is generally assumed that they were rulers of the Oyo Empire whose reigns immediately preceded the period of the Jihād. This assumption neglects the well-known phenomenon of the floating gap in oral traditions which succeeds the period of origin and precedes the period of the recent past, both characterized by a wealth of information, while for the middle period there is a total absence of data (Vansina 1985: 23 f.). Trying to make sense of some complex events related by the tradition, historians supposed that they were propagandistic projections of nineteenth-century developments into the past (Law 1985: 33–49; Agiri 1975: 5–11). Some time ago it was recognized that the early Šango section of the Oyo tradition reflects an episode of ninth-century Israelite history, but this analysis of a single section of the tradition found little echo (Lange 1999: 88–99; 2004: 239–242). The following development provides a rough overview of the entire Oyo tradition, indicating that in fact the rich pre-Jihād corpus of the tradition refers not to local but to Israelite-Assyrian history. It is based on a comparison of the different available records of the tradition, including the well-known version of the tradition recorded by Samuel Johnson and the newly discovered slightly abbreviated version of the tradition translated by the French priest Jean Hess (Johnson 1921: 143–182; Hess 1898: 117–175). The full results of this research dealing with all five sections of the tradition will hopefully be published in the near future.

First Section

The first section of the corpus of Oyo tradition concerns early Israelite and Assyrian kings. Recited in a clear sequence the well-structured royal poems of Oyo begin with Lamarudu/Nimrod (1), the biblical name the Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279) (Levin 2002: 359 f.). He is followed by Oduduva (2), the legendary founder of Ife, and Oranyan/Oranmiyan, the legendary founder of Oyo. On account of the root *dōd* “beloved” applied in the form *mdd* to the Semitic chaos deity, Yamm, and the plural ending *-āwu* > *-ūwa*, Oduduwa seems to designate a plurality of half-hostile, half-friendly Assyrian kings.⁴ As for Oranyan/Oranmiyan the name seems to stand for Jacob son of Isaac also called Israel, the epony-

mous ancestor of the Israelites. In view of its derivation from *orun* “heaven” > *oran*, the first component part of the name Oranyan/Oranmiyan is cognate with the Semitic *semen* “heaven” included in the name Samemroumos “high heaven,” sometimes thought to be an epithet of the patriarch Jacob (Meyer 1906: 278; Dijkstra DDD: 863). More generally, Oranyan’s key position in both the Oyo tradition of origin and the Oyo creation account provides him with the characteristic of a central figure of Israelite legend and mythology (Johnson 1921: 143–146; Hess 1898: 123–127).

Oyo dynastic tradition continues with the epoch ruler Ajaka (4) corresponding to Isaac. Omitting any reference to David and Solomon, the kings of the so-called unified kingdom of Israel, it next describes the rise of the fierce king Šango (pronounced *Šàngó*), thought to have ruled over the kingdom for seven years. Šango (5) fought primarily against Oloyokoro, “King of core Oyo,” and when he was about to vanquish him, he gave his henchman Omosanda the opportunity to defeat his enemy and to put him to flight (Hess 1898: 137–142; Johnson 1921: 149–152). This succession of events closely corresponds to the first Assyrian intervention in Israel under Shalmaneser III, which, according to some historians, was an important factor in the overthrow of Joram by Jehu and the substitution of the Omrides by the dynasty of Jehu (Astour 1971; Ahlström 1993: 592–596). The name Šango is most likely derived from *šangû*, the priestly royal title of Assyrian kings, Oloyokoro (Yoruba: “King of core Oyo”) apparently designates Joram, the last king of the Omrides, while the name Omosanda (Yoruba: “son of Sanda”) refers to Jehu b. Nimsi (841–804), the founder of the second dynasty of Israel. Supported by some reconstructions of Israelite history, this account of events describes Jehu as an instrument of Assyrian expansionism.

The dramatic demise of Šango culminating in the destruction of his palace and the killing of his family, combines the figure of the ninth century Assyrian conqueror with that of the last king of metropolitan Assyria, who committed suicide with some members of his family in order to avoid falling into the hands of the Babylonian conquerors of Nineveh in 612 B.C. After Šango’s death we find again the epoch hero Ajaka/Isaac on the Oyo/Israelite throne, in whose second name Ajuwon it is tempting to see a slightly changed form of the name Jehu. From him the tradition shifts to two kings, Aganju (6) and Kōri (7), who according to the story of the former’s wife and the latter’s mother, Iyayun/Semiramis, can perhaps be identified with the Assyrian

⁴ Jes 8:7; 17:13; Day (1985: 101–104); Stolz, DDD: 1390–1401; Lange (2004: 355).

kings Shamshi-Adad V (824–811) and Adad-nirari III (811–781).⁵

The next king mentioned by Oyo tradition is Oluaso (8) who on account of his name appears to correspond to the Israelite king Joash (804–790). Though at first sight both names seem to have little in common, a simple transformation seems to have taken place: the theophoric part of the name Jo/Yahweh was replaced by the neutral El/olu theophoric element, while the second part of the name was only slightly changed: *aš* (has given) > *aso*. Both kings are remembered for their peaceful and beneficial reign. The last mentioned king of preexile Israel is Olugbogi (9), who by his name – the second part of the name being a dialectical variant of (*yāro*)*b'ām* “may the people be great” > (Olug)bogi – seems to be equivalent to Jeroboam II (790–750). He was succeeded by three further Israelite kings, reigning for more than two years – Menahem (749–738), Pekah (740–732), and Hoshea (731–722). These minor kings are remembered in other contexts in Oyo tradition as Memie/Menahem and Paku/Pekah and in other Yoruba traditions as Huisi/Hoshea.⁶ The deportation of Israelites began after the conquest of the major part of the northern kingdom by Tiglath-pileser III in 733–732 and it was continued after the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. (Younger 1998: 204–224; Liverani 2005: 145–147). It is, therefore, quite plausible that neglecting the last minor kings of Israel, Oyo tradition concentrates on Olugbogi/Jeroboam II as the last ruler of the Israelite kingdom before its destruction and the deportation of the people.

The kings of the first period of Oyo history are described by Hess as semi-divine (1898: 156). According to Johnson, the skulls of members of the royal family belonging to the first, or Omride, dynasty are still worshipped today in the palace of Oyo in the name of Obatala, a deity equivalent to Yahweh.⁷ These elements show that the Israelite past of the Oyo kings is held in higher esteem than the subsequent history under Assyrian auspices.

Second Section

The second section of the corpus of Oyo tradition deals with the exile of the Israelites in the Igboho/Hubur region. It is clearly distinguished from the preceding and the succeeding sections by the sup-

posed burial of its kings in the town of Igboho, situated 55 km west of Oyo. The whole period is conceived of as an exile of the people and their successive kings in Igboho. Within the dynastic tradition of Oyo it apparently corresponds to the local projection of the Assyrian exile of Israelites in the Hubur region in eastern Syria subsequently to the Assyrian conquest of Samaria in 722 B.C. Apart from the spatial differentiation with regard to the residence of the people in Oyo and in Igboho, the semidivine nature of the early kings as opposed to the human nature of all the other kings introduces a distinction between two categories of kings who can be shown to have been first Israelites (with some intermediate Assyrians) and then Assyrians from the period of exile.

The first king of the Igboho section of Oyo tradition is Ofiran (10), who has been compared with Şango and hence with the great Assyrian epoch ruler (Law 1985: 35, 50). His second name was apparently Omoloju (Yoruba: “son of Loju”) which can be seen as being derived from Ululaju, the birth name or nickname of Shalmaneser V (726–722).⁸ By a confusion of sonship and successorship, the “son” of Ululaju/Shalmaneser V was most likely his successor Sargon II (621–605), and, therefore, the tradition seems to have highlighted the difference between Israelite and Assyrian kings. Indeed, after the conquest of Samaria, Sargon II deported a great number of Israelites, perhaps the majority of the population, into exile (Na’aman 1993: 106–108; Younger 1998: 214–219). From this point the tradition incorporates Assyrian rulers into a list of originally Israelite kings, and thus faithfully reflects the experience of exiled Israelites, who after deportation from their home country to Gozan/Hubur were no longer depending on their own but on Assyrian authorities.

After Ofiran/Sargon II we find a male, a female, and again a male king, Eguguoju (11), Orumpoto (12), and Ajibojede (13), who on account of their position and their gender can possibly be identified with the Assyrian royal figures Sennacherib (704–781), Naqi’a, and Esarhaddon (680–669) (Johnson 1921: 161–164; Hess 1898: 157f.). Queen Naqi’a, the wife of Sennacherib, was a regent of her minor son, Esarhaddon, and had great authority at the Assyrian royal court. Besides her Aramaic name, Naqi’a, she was also known by the Akkadian name of Zukutu, both meaning “pure” (Streck, RLA/IX: 165). Etymologically, the name Esarhaddon/Aššur-ahī-iddin (Assur has given a brother) may be con-

5 Johnson (1921: 155–158); Lange (1999: 96f.; 2004: 240f.).

6 Hess (1898: 136; Memie a son of Ajaka); Johnson 1921: 152 (Paku a medicine man of Ajaka); Ellis (1894: 55f.; Huisi fought with Şango).

7 Johnson (1921: 152, 154); 2 Kgs 10:7; Lange (1999: 84f.).

8 Falola and Doortmont (1989: 313); Baker, RLA/XI: 586; Burstein (1978: 38; Ptolemaic Canon).

Table 1: Names of Israelite, Assyrian and Babylonian kings in the dynastic tradition of Oyo.

N°	Israelite kings	Assyrian, Babyl. kings	Original names	Chronology
LEGENDARY KINGS OF MESOPOTAMIA				
1		Namudu/Lamarudu	Nimrod /Sargon of Akkad	2334–2279
2		Oduduwa	Dôd /Tiamat – Assyrian epoch ruler	
I. ISRAELITE AND ASSYRIAN KINGS UNTIL THE ASSYRIAN CONQUEST OF ISRAEL IN 722 B.C.				
3	Oranyan		Jacob/Israel	
4	Ajaka		Isaac /Omid dynasty	884–841
5		Şango	Shalmaneser III (<i>Šulmānu-ašarēd</i>)	858–824
	Omọ-sanda		Jehu b. Nimsi	841–815
	Ajaka		Isaac /early Nimsid dynasty	841–804
6		Aganju	Shamshi -Adad V (<i>Šamši-Adad</i>)	824–811
7		Kõri	Adad-nirari III (<i>Adad-nīrārī</i>)	811–781
8	Oluaso		Joash	804–790
9	Olugbogi		Jerobeam II	790–750
II. ISRAELITES IN EXILE IN THE IGBOHO/HUBUR REGION: ASSYRIAN KINGS FROM 722 TO 627				
10		Ofiran/Omọloju	Sargon II (<i>Šarru-kīn</i>)/Son of Ulūlāju	721–705
11		Eguguju	Sennacherib (<i>Sīn-aḥḫē-erība</i>)	704–781
12		Orọmpọtọ	Naqi’a	(680–678)
13		Ajiboyede	Esarhaddon (<i>Aššur-aḫa-iddina</i>)	680–669
14		Abipa	Assurbanipal (<i>Aššur-bāni-apli</i>)	668–627
III. FINAL STRUGGLE OF THE ASSYRIAN KINGS FROM 627 TO 612 B.C.				
(15	Obalokun		Hoshea (Isr.)	732–722)
16		Ajagbo	Assurbanipal (<i>Aššur-bāni-apli</i>) (Assyr.)	668–627
17, 22		Oderawu/Ojigi/Timi	Assur-etil-ilani (<i>Aššur-etelli-ilāni</i>) (Assyr.)	627–623
19, 20		Jayin, Ayibi	? ?	? ?
21		Osinyago	<i>Hallušu-Išušinak</i> (Elam)	699–683
23		Gberu/Gbõnka	Nabopolassar (<i>Nabû-apla-uşur</i>) (Bab)	626–605
24		Amuniwaiye	Sin-shum-lishir (<i>Sīn-şumu-līşer</i>) (Assyr.)	623
18, 25		Karan/Onişile	Sin-shar-ishkun (<i>Sīn-şarra-işkun</i>) (Assyr.)	623–612
IV. BABYLONIAN VASSAL KINGS UNDER ASSYRIAN DOMINATION: 744 TO 612 B.C.				
26		Labisi	Nabonassar (<i>Nabû-nāşir</i>) (Bab.)	747–734
		Gaha (despotic Vizier)	Tiglath-pileser III, Sin-shar-ishkun (Assyr.)	744–727, 623–612
27		Awõbioju	Marduk-apla-iddina II (Bab.)	721–710
28		Agboluaje	Bel-ibni (Bab.)	702–700
29		Majeogbe	Mushezib-Marduk (Bab.)	692–689
V. FALL OF ASSYRIA IN 612 B.C.				
30		Abiqdun	Nabopolassar (<i>Nabû-apla-uşur</i>) (Bab.)	626–605

sidered as being cognate to Ajiboyede: without the theophoric element *aššur-* we have > *aḫi* (bother) > *aji*, an additional *bo* and *-iddin* (given) > *yede* = *Aji(bo)yede* (cf. Weißbach, RLA/I: 198). More-

over, it is quite conceivable that Orọmpọtọ reflects an original name or a translated name of Queen Naqi’a. If these assumptions are valid, the number and gender of the Assyrian and Oyo series of names

between Sargon II/Ofiran (10) and Assurbanipal/Abipa (14) (see below) would be identical.

The last king of the Igboho period of Oyo history, according to Johnson's account of the tradition, is Abipa (14): Hess omits him and several others of the Igboho and post-Igboho kings, by sometimes indicating deliberate omissions. According to the tradition, Abipa was the king who led the people from the place of their exile back to their original home (Johnson 1921: 164–167; Hess 1898: 158 f.). By his name and his position he resembles Assurbanipal (668–627), whose name Aššur-bân-apli means “the god Assur is the creator of the son” (Weißbach, RLA/I: 203; Roux 1992: 329). Etymologically, Abipa seems to be a hypocoristic form of Assurbanipal with a minor metathesis; Aššur-bân-apli: *A(ššur) > A-, b(ân)-ap(l)i > -bipa > Abipa*. Though it is unlikely that Assurbanipal finished the exile of the Israelites in Gozan/Ḥubur region, it is quite conceivable that some of the deportees were allowed to return to Samaria. Assurbanipal was the last ruler of the great Assyrian Empire. After his death, there began a period of civil strife which opened the way for an alliance between two formerly subordinated regional powers, Babylonia and Media, leading to the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Traditions recorded by Ctesias two centuries after the fall of Assyria depict Sardanapallus/Assurbanipal as the last king of Assyria who died in the flames of his palace, and thus merge Assurbanipal with Sin-shar-ishkun (623–612) (Diodorus II: 27; Oates 1991: 180). By finishing its account of the Igboho/Ḥubur exile with Abipa/Assurbanipal, Oyo tradition is, therefore, fully in line with the major oral tradition in Mesopotamia itself.

Third Section

The third section of the corpus of Oyo tradition refers to the final struggle of the Assyrian Empire but contrary to the previous two sections it offers a multiethnic perspective on Assyrian history. Its duplication and slight chronological inconsistency may, therefore, be explained by the attempt to add an Israelite dimension to the mainly Assyrian royal names of this section. By the incorporation of the Babylonian conqueror of Assyria into the list of kings it resembles the last ancient Near Eastern section of the Kebbi and Kanem king lists (Lange 2009: 370; 2011b: 14).

Beginning with a flashback, this section first provides a link-up with the earlier Israelite history. Indeed, before continuing the chronological account of Yoruba-Assyrian history, it mentions two previ-

ous figures, Obalokun (15) and Ajagbo (16) (Johnson 1921: 168 f.; Hess 1898: 159 f.). In view of the prestigious *oba* element – derived from Aramaic *ba'l* “lord” > Yor. *oba* “king” – the first name designates possibly Hoshea (732–722), the last Israelite king. The next king Ajagbo is characterized by his remarkably long reign, by his resemblance to his brother, and by the contrast between his warlike behavior during the first half of his reign and his peacefulness during the second half. He, therefore, resembles Assurbanipal whose reign of about forty years was the longest of all Neo-Assyrian kings. His brother Shamash-shuma-ukin (667–648) – mentioned in the Oyo tradition as Ajampati – ruled in Babylonia and the final fifteen years of his reign seem to have been peaceful (Saggs 1984: 109–117; Roux 1992: 336). The chronological overlapping between the second section and the beginning of the third section can perhaps be explained by the attempt of an early chronicler to add an Israelite perspective to the break-up of the Assyrian Empire.

The son and successor of Assurbanipal, Assur-etil-ilani (627–623), was the Assyrian king whose reign inaugurated the downfall of the empire. He seems to be represented in the tradition by two different figures, Oderawu (17) and Ojigi (22) (Johnson 1921: 169–174; Hess 1898: 160 f.). The first resembles his Assyrian prototype by his relatively short rule and by his revenge in attacking a distant town, which originally could have been a Babylonian city, in which one of his adversaries was based. The name Ojigi is possibly derived from Aššur-etelli-ilāni (Assur, hero of the gods): *Aššur-(etelli) > Oji- and (ilā)ni > -gi*. Gberu (23), the next king of the tradition, could, on account of his name, correspond to Nabopolassar (626–605), the Babylonian conqueror of Nineveh; Nabû-apla-ušur (O Nabû, protect (my) son): *Nabû- > Gbe- and (-apla-uš)ur > -ru*. In Oyo tradition, Nabopolassar is more clearly recognizable in Gbonka, the rival governor of Timi/Assur-etil-ilani (627–623) and victor over the epoch hero Šango, here Sin-shar-ishkun (623–612), and in Gaha, the despotic Vizier.⁹ That the Chaldean founder of the Neo-Babylonian Empire was indeed positively remembered by Assyrian refugee groups of the Central Sudan can be seen from the Assyrian-inspired king lists of Kanem-Borno and Kebbi, where he is mentioned in the penultimate or ultimate position of the ancient Near Eastern section of these lists under the names Bulu and Maru-Kanta (Lange 2011b: 14; 2009: 370).

⁹ Johnson (1921: 156, n. 1); Ogunmola (1997: 65); Diodorus (1990–2000/II: 27).

In Oyo tradition, Gberu/Nabopolassar is followed by Amuniwaiye (24) who seems to correspond to Sin-shum-lishir, the eunuch general and successor of his former protégé Assur-etil-ilani. Amuniwaiye resembles his prototype by continuing the warlike actions of his predecessor, by his generosity towards the simple people, indicating perhaps his own formerly poor conditions, and by a sexual scandal reminiscent through an ironical transposition of the king’s status of eunuch.¹⁰ Moreover, after omission of the theophoric element *sin-* (moon god), the derivation of the name Amuniwaiye from Sin-shum-lishir seems to be quite plausible: (*Sin-*)*šumu* > Amu- and *-lišir* > -niwaiye.

Next there is Onișile (25), who by his rashness, his fearlessness, and his suicide clearly resembles Sin-shar-ishkun, the successor of Amuniwaye/Sin-shum-lishir (Johnson 1921: 176f.; Saggs 1984: 118–120). Onișile’s name seems to derive from *sin*, the theophoric element of *Sin-šarra-iškun*, “the god Sin has appointed the king,” designating the moon god Sin (Roux 1992: 373; Saggs 1984: 203). The prefix *oni-* appears to be related to the Babylonian title *oni/en-* “Lord” and thus could indicate that its bearer started his conquest of Assyria from the territory of Babylonia (Seux 1964: 396f.; Oates 1991: 176). Originally meaning “Lord (*en*),” the prefix *oni-* “Lord/King” may also be considered as a Babylonian translation of the second element of his name, the Akkadian *šarru*, “king”.¹¹ Hence, on account of the parallel features of his reign and his cognate name, it is very likely that Onișile corresponds to Sin-shar-ishkun, who died during the conquest of Nineveh by Babylonian and Median forces in 612 B.C.

In Johnson’s account of Oyo tradition Onișile/Sin-shar-ishkun is the last figure in a section of rulers called “despotic kings” (1921/XII: 176f.). Although the author knew nothing about the transfer of an Israelite-Assyrian tradition to West Africa, this definition describes the character of the last Assyrian kings very well. Moreover, it should be noted that the fate of the last king ruling in the metropolitan capital had such important repercussions on Oyo traditions that different aspects of his destiny were projected onto four different figures: the destruction of his palace and of his whole family resulting from his own hubris was cast onto the epoch ruler Șango (5), the stout resistance of the king in

his palace onto Karan (18), the enforced suicide in his palace in consequence of a divine punishment onto Onișile (25), and the death in his palace as a result of the conquest of the town onto Gaha (Johnson 1921: 149–186; Hess 1898: 137–173). Owing to the dissociation of the ancient Near Eastern tradition from its original geographical setting and its engrafting onto the local West African scenery, the original meaning of events and the character of the successive figures could not be preserved from distortions and multiplications.

Fourth Section

The fourth section of the corpus of Oyo tradition deals with the Babylonian vassal kings of the second half of the eighth and the seventh century B.C. It offers a narrative of events, in which the data are arranged in a partly disturbing way. Thus, the great figure of this section, the despotic Vizier Gaha, is apparently an epoch ruler who represents the major Neo-Assyrian kings up till the fall of the last metropolitan king, Sin-shar-ishkun (623–612). By contrast, the legitimate kings seem – by an amazing shift of the perspective – to correspond to the Neo-Babylonian kings, finishing appropriately with the conqueror of the Assyrian Empire, Abiødun (30)/Nabopolassar (626–605).

The section begins with Labisi (26) who is characterized by the curious fact that he was nominated but never crowned, and therefore never entered the palace. Only 17 days after the beginning of the enthronement rituals Gaha is said to have usurped power. By his weakness, his incomplete enthronement and his submission to a partly indigenous, partly foreign leader Labisi resembles Nabonassar (747–734), the Chaldean founder of the Neo-Babylonian kingdom. Having endured anarchy for several generations, Babylonia enjoyed in his time unprecedented prosperity (Brinkman, RLA/IX: 6). Moreover, the name Labisi may be considered as an orally changed and simplified form of *Nabû-nâșir* “Nabu protects” by the omission of *-nâ-* and *-r*: *Na* > *La-*, *-bû-* > *-bi-*, *și* > *i*. Hence, through his position as the – fictitious – follower of the last metropolitan Assyrian king Onișile/Sin-shar-ishkun (623–612) and the inaugurator of a new line of kings he is in all likelihood identical with Nabonassar, the acclaimed first ruler of the Babylonian “Nabonassar Era” (Brinkman, RLA/IX: 6). Comparing the fate of the two kings, we realize that Oyo tradition traces a counterfactual continuity from the last Assyrian to the Neo-Babylonian kings. It appears that the addition of four Chaldean kings to the last Assyrian rul-

10 Johnson (1921: 175f.); Hess (1898: 164–166); Oates (1991: 168, 170, 174f.).

11 Being also recognizable in the Ooni title of the kings of Ife, the Babylonian *Oni/en* title and the town’s creation myth confer to Ife the status of a successor town of Babylon under the hegemony of the Assyrian epoch ruler Oduduwa (cf. Bascom 1969: 9–11).

ers can only be explained by the attempt to bolster the importance of the last ancient Near Eastern king Abiḳdun (30)/Nabopolassar (626–605) of the Oyo tradition, owing to the presence of Babylonian refugees among the Oyo state founders.

The Vizier Gaha is described as a usurper who took over power a few days after the beginning of the enthronement rituals of Labisi/Nabonassar. Unlike a normal vizier, he controlled the whole territorial administration of the kingdom and posted his sons to the different provincial towns, so that all the tributes were paid to his family (Johnson 1921: 71 f., 280 f.). He therefore behaved like a foreign king with some kind of local roots who assumed supreme power and reduced the legitimate ruler to a puppet king. On the other hand, Gaha is mainly depicted as a bloodthirsty local tyrant who oppressed and murdered four different kings before he was himself killed by the fifth.

The Baṣorun or Vizier Gaha/Ga resembles the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-pileser III (744–727) seen from the perspective of the Babylonian people. Tiglath-pileser III seized the Assyrian throne as a result of a revolution after more than half a century of political decline. Though he was most likely not a member of the royal family he was quickly able to assert his power in Assyria, before extending it to the neighboring countries. Only five months after he ascended the throne, he launched a campaign against Babylonia, defeated the Arameans and imposed Assyrian domination on the recently installed king Labisi/Nabonassar (747–734). It is quite conceivable that the name Gaha is derived from the first part of the name *Tukultī-apil-ešara* “my trust is in the son of Esharra,” usually written in the biblical form Tiglath-pileser. The dropping of the first and the middle syllables of the name and the transformation of the last element of the name *Tukultī-apil-ešara* – *-ku-* > *Ga-*, – *ešara* > *-ha* – may have resulted in the form *Ga-ha*. In support of this identification it should be noted that Tiglath-pileser III is in spite of his great influence on Israelite history omitted from the list of preceding Assyrian rulers: Ajaka (4)/Isaac, Şango (5)/Shalmaneser III (858–824), Aganju (6)/Shamshi-Adad V (824–811), Kḳri (7)/Adad-nirari III (811–781), Oluaso (8)/Joash (804–790), Olubogi (9)/Jerobeam II (790–750) and Ofiran (10)/Sargon II (721–705). On account of the recording of his name as Fune (4) in the Chronicle of Kanem-Bornu and as Fumi (28) in the king list of Kebbi, one would expect him to be mentioned in the tradition of Oyo in the position between Olubogi (9)/Jerobeam II (790–750) and Ofiran (10)/Sargon II (721–705). Generally the omission of his name from this line of mixed Israelite-Assyrian kings can hardly be

explained otherwise than by the deliberate decision of the early scholars to avoid double naming whenever possible. The preference given here to Babylonian history seems to be an important concession to the community of Babylonians among the state founders of Oyo. More particularly however it might have been in relation to the proclaimed identity of Gaha/Tiglath-pileser III with the Baṣorun, reflecting probably the creation of this office for Assyrian notables. Such a repercussion of ancient Near Eastern history on an institution created in Africa made it necessary to place Gaha/Tiglath-pileser III and with him the whole Babylonian section of the king list in spite of chronological inconsistencies at the very end of the list of ancient Near Eastern kings.

The events leading to the overthrow of Gaha and his death show that the historical prototype of the defeated Vizier was Sin-shar-ishkun, the last king of metropolitan Assyria. The insurrection was organized in different provinces at the same time and Gaha was shut in his palace. Finally the people stormed the palace, caught the Vizier and discovered that he was disfigured by a pedunculated tumour on his forehead. They built a big pyre, bound him to a stake and burned him alive (Johnson 1921: 184 f.). Similar to Oyo tradition, Persian tradition describes Zohak/Sin-shar-ishkun as a despotic king who suffered from two tumors on his shoulders and whom the people finally defeated and killed in the ruins of his palace (Liverani 2001: 374–377). According to Mesopotamian tradition, Sardanapalus/Sin-shar-ishkun died during the combined attack of the Babylonians and the Medes on Ninos/Nineveh in the flames of his palace (Diodorus II: 27; Oates 1991: 180). Contrary to the previous Assyrian figures mentioned in Oyo tradition – Şango (5), Karan (18) and Onişile (25) – Gaha is seen from the perspective of the Babylonian people. He is considered contemptuously as a Vizier who usurped power and held in custody several successive legitimate Babylonian kings: Awḳbioju (27)/Marduk-apla-iddina II (721–710), Agboluaje (28)/Bel-ibni (702–700) and Majeogbe (29)/Mushezib-Marduk (692–689) (Roux 1992: 312, 321 f.). His disfiguration and his death on a pyre clearly identify him as Sin-shar-ishkun, the last great Assyrian king.

Fifth Section

The despotic and illegitimate Gaha was overthrown by Abiḳdun (30), according to Johnson the last king of this section. Abiḳdun is described as a wise and prudent king who was not a descendant of the old dynasty but a former trader. The details of his rise to

power bring him close to Nabopolassar (626–605), the Babylonian conqueror of Nineveh: first he lived in the shadow of Gaha/Sin-shar-ishkun, then he secretly contacted his homologue in another town, organizing with him a concerted uprising in all the provinces of the country, in the course of which Gaha was caught in his palace and burned on a pyre (Johnson 1921: 183–185). These episodes closely resemble the events which led to the downfall of Assyria in 612 B.C.: the secret alliance between Nabopolassar and the Median king Cyaxares, the concerted attack of Nineveh, the conquest of the city, and the death of Sin-shar-ishkun in the flames of the palace.¹²

Subsequently Abiḡdun began his long and beneficial reign, very much resembling that of Nabopolassar who controlled the Assyrian heartlands after the defeat of the Assyrian army in 612 B.C. (Oates 1991: 189; Roux 1992: 376). Through some further details he also acquires the coloring of an African salvation figure: meaning “born during the festival,” A-bí-ḡdún is the first specifically Yoruba royal name in the whole Oyo tradition; he is said to have been a person of very black complexion and it is claimed that with him finished the tranquility and prosperity of life under the great kings (Abraham 1958: 8; Johnson 1921: 186 f.). Thus, Abiḡdun has all the characteristics of an ideal ruler who on the basis of his primordial identity as the founder of the Babylonian Empire was by extension also considered as the first king of the people on African soil, as the first black African king and even as the “father” of Atiba (1839–1858) (Johnson 1921: 68).

Published by Jean Hess, the second version of the Oyo tradition ends the account of ancient kings with Majeogbe (29) and thus omits any reference to Gaha, and apparently also to Abiḡdun (30). By depicting Majeogbe as a king guilty of the terrible crime of killing all the elderly men except one, it confers on him traits of the last Assyrian ruler which also crop up in several other key figures of the tradition. Moreover, Hess (1898: 119) insists on the fact that Majeogbe was the last king remembered within the corpus of lengthy and well-conceived royal poems following each other in a series.¹³ Although the surviving old man somewhat resembles Abiḡdun, Hess’s informant seems to end pre-African Yoruba history with Majeogbe. A similar conclusion can be reached on the basis of Johnson’s rendering of the

tradition. It first presents Oyo history by successive reigns, but following the reign of Abiḡdun it begins an account by successive wars. Therefore, it appears that his informant, similar to the bard interviewed by Hess, ended here his recitation of the series of ancient and well-structured poems and began his account of the recent past on the basis of haphazard praise songs and personal recollections.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, none of the pre-nineteenth-century kings mentioned in Oyo tradition can be traced in contemporary West African records. There are two points where synchronisms with Oyo tradition seemed to be possible on the basis of similar events, but these apparent correspondences for the years 1754 and 1774 A.D. have to be discarded as fallacious (Law 1977: 54; [ed.] 1993: 40 f., 64). As we have seen above, identifications with successive Israelite and Assyrian kings are highly plausible. Historians previously overlooked the possibility of such identifications for different reasons. Neglecting the structural differences between the accounts of recent and ancient kings, they thought that the recent kings of Oyo were directly preceded by the ancient kings (of the Near East). Similarly, they disregarded the phenomenon of the floating gap in orally transmitted king lists that can be detected in a variety of oral traditions.¹⁵ Moreover, they were misled by the notion of a great migration misplaced at the beginning of the ancient royal poems of Oyo. Above all they were led astray by the apodictic denial of Near Eastern origins expressed by critics of the Hamitic hypothesis. By contrast, the proposed interpretation of Oyo dynastic tradition as an authentic account of Israelite-Assyrian history will hopefully open up the opportunity to consider numerous key elements of Yoruba customs as survivals of ancient Near Eastern and particularly Israelite traditions.

1.4 The Yoruba as the “Lost Tribes of Israel”

Contrary to other African people – such as also the neighboring Igbo in southwestern Nigeria – the Yoruba never claimed an Israelite identity (Basden 1921: 411–423; Hodgkin 1975: 218 f.). Although several authors pointed out the existence of Israelite customs among the Yoruba, they saw them as side effects of Israelite influences and not as the result of

12 Diodorus (1990–2000/II: 24,1–27,3); Grayson (1975: 91–94); Oates (1991: 180).

13 The omissions specifically indicated concern the time between Osinyago (21) and Amuniwaije (24) and the time between Amuniwaije (24) and Agboluaje (28) (Hess 1898: 164, 166).

14 According to Akin Akinyemi, the poems for the early kings of Oyo are richer and more original than those for the nineteenth and twenty century kings (2004: 131, n. 1 and pers. com. 6/4/2010).

15 Similarly, the king lists of Kanem-Bornu and of Kebbi omit after the ancient Near Eastern rulers all the African kings until the rise of Islam (Lange 2011b: 14; 2009: 370).

a direct cultural transfer through migration from the northern kingdom of Israel (Johnson 1921: 6 f., 154; Biobaku 1955: 12 f.). More recently, reexamination of the Oyo dynastic tradition in combination with a comparison of cultural traits led to the conclusion that direct links must have existed between the northern Israelites and the Yoruba. However, owing to the incomplete study of Oyo tradition, this conclusion did not indicate the precise nature of the historical connection between ancient Israel and the Oyo-Yoruba. Avoiding the unmentionable notion of mass migration from the ancient Near East, it suggested instead that the remnants of Israelite traditions and culture traits were the result of sporadic influences from Syria-Palestine via Egypt, or of long-lasting trade relations between Phoenician North Africa and sub-Saharan West Africa (Lange 1999: 138–140; 2004: 239–242).

The notion of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel on the other hand is a convenient designation for the Northern Israelites deported by Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II in the second half of the eighth century B.C. and their descendants.¹⁶ According to different authors, either the majority of the inhabitants of the northern kingdom or just the upper social stratum was deported by the Assyrians (Na'aman 1993: 117–119; Younger 1998). The Assyrian authorities resettled the deportees in the region of Ḫubur/Gozan, in northern Assyria and in the cities of the Medes in Persia.¹⁷ Most often the exiled Israelites are supposed to have been assimilated in their new settlements by the indigenous populations, so that the idea of the lost tribes of Israel surviving in some other location is thought to correspond to a myth without historical foundation (Charlesworth, ABD/IV: 372; Parfitt 2002: 3–24). However, the general deportation praxis of the Assyrian authorities consisted in the resettlement of homogeneous communities in order to sustain high morale and the will to live and to work (Oded 1979: 33–74; Liverani 2005: 151). Also, traces of Israelite deportees having maintained their identity can be found in Assyrian documents from seventh-century Gozan/Guzana, showing that some of these people were incorporated into the Assyrian army, while others were employed in the administration (Becking 1992: 61–94; Oded 1979: 75–115). Since moreover Israelites are well-known for their strong feelings of identity based on firm religious bonds, it is unlikely that during their relatively short Assyrian exile extend-

ing over slightly more than a hundred years they were absorbed by Assyrians or Aramaeans in a region such as Ḫubur/Gozan, where they seem to have settled in homogeneous groups.

From a comparative analysis of Oyo dynastic tradition and ancient Near Eastern history, it appears that Israelites migrated to West Africa subsequently to the fall of the Assyrian Empire, and that their descendants survive as the core people of the present-day Oyo-Yoruba. Indeed, Oyo tradition reveals that the ancestral Yoruba were mainly composed of Israelites, who, in the course of their history, became influenced by Assyrian views of past events. Providing precious details about the ancient Near Eastern history of their ancestors, it begins with some information on the Omride dynasty which ruled over Israel in the second half of the tenth and the first half of the ninth century. It continues by emphasizing the importance of the first Assyrian intervention in Israelite history – which took place in 841 B.C. – and at the same time it underlines the subservient role of Qmošanda/Jehu with respect to the Assyrian conquerors.¹⁸ Subsequently it depicts favourably some of the Israelite kings, and alluding to the Assyrian conquest of Samaria in 722 B.C., it mentions the departure of the people into exile under the leadership of Ofiran/Sargon II. From now on substituting Assyrian for Israelite kings it describes the settlement of the people under their new kings in the region of Ḫubur/Igboho, their main place of exile (situated in eastern Syria). It refers to the death of the last metropolitan Assyrian king in Nineveh in 612 B.C., and hence to the end of the Assyrian exile, first in a sympathetic and later in a hostile way, reflecting pro- and anti-Assyrian sentiments among immigrant groups to West Africa. The latter attitude would seem to have been particularly appropriate for Babylonian groups which, though unable to join the fight of their brethren on account of their settlement in Syria, sided emotionally with them and, therefore, later styled Abiōdun/Nabopolassar as a national hero. Indeed, we know from other early West African sources that refugees from the collapsing Assyrian Empire to sub-Saharan Africa included – besides former Israelites – descendants of deportees from Babylonia, Elam and Urartu, as well as descendants of deported Kassites, Aramaeans, and Hittites.¹⁹ We also know that Nabopolassar (called Bulu and Maru-Tamau) is given a key position towards the end of the Near Eastern sec-

16 Becking (1992: 8–94); Parfitt (2002: 3–24); Bruder (2008: 11–18).

17 2 Kgs 15:29; 17:6; 1 Chr 2:26; Judg 18:13; Becking (1992: 61–77); Na'aman (1993).

18 Ahlström (1993: 592–596); Lange (1999: 88–99; 2004: 230–240).

19 On the participation of these people in the flight to West Africa, see Lange (2009: 369–375, and 2011b: 13–17).

tions of the king lists of Kanem and Kebbi (Lange 2011b: 13; 2009: 374). However, Israelite kings and concepts figure more centrally in Oyo tradition than Assyrian and Babylonian rulers, only Abiḡdun/Nabopolassar acquiring a disproportionate importance. While this insistence on Israelite history in the tradition adopted for all immigrant settlers does not prove that Israelites constituted the majority among the original state founders of Oyo, it doubtlessly indicates that descendants of Israelites were the most relevant ethnic element of all the immigrant groups with respect to the capacity of shaping and transmitting the people’s ancient Near Eastern history.

The Ten Lost Tribes properly speaking are largely absent from Oyo dynastic tradition. They appear, however, in the creation account dealing with the seven princes whom Olodumare/El let down on a chain to the primordial sea. Each of these princes received a heritage, but the youngest, Ḡranyan/Ḡranmyian, the equivalent of Jacob, was given the instruments of creation and, therefore, he became the creator of the solid ground on the water (in Oyo/Samaria). Having thus created the earth, Ḡranyan/Jacob emerged naturally as its ruler. The seven princes dispersed in Yorubaland where they founded seven kingdoms, Ḡranyan/Jacob becoming the founder of the Oyo/Israelite Empire (Hess 1898: 121–123; Johnson 1921: 8 f.). As in the Hausa legend mentioned above, the number of ten tribes is reduced among the West African immigrants to seven, but in the case of the Yoruba tradition the right to rule is related to creation, and hence to legitimate power and not to patriarchal descent. The former Israelite meaning of the concept – as far as we know it from the Hebrew Bible – was, therefore, given a quite different, and in certain aspects perhaps more ancient meaning. Also, while in the biblical tradition it refers solely to Israelite tribes (the non-Israelites being the sons of an illegitimate wife), in Oyo tradition it connects Israel with other nations (classified in the Hausa tradition under the sons of the slave maid) in consequence of Assyrian deportations. By providing Ḡranyan/Jacob with the role of creator of the earth, the tradition *ipso facto* confers on the revived Israelite kingdom of the Oyo-Yoruba – by a complete reversal of the situation created in the Near East by the Assyrian conquests – the legitimate right to dominate all the others, who in the West African context were the descendants of other deported nations.²⁰

20 In line with the Israelite figures of Ajaka/Isaac, Ḡranyan/Jacob and Oluḡsu/Joash the Yoruba name seems to be derived from Jeroboam (may the people be great), the name of the founder of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Evans, ABD/III: 742–745).

The article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Conference “Jews and Judanism in Black Africa and Its Diaporas” which was held at the School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London, 30–31 October 2010.

Abbreviations

- ABD Freedman, D. N. (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 Vols. New York: Doubleday. 1992.
- DDD Toorn, K. van der, et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Leiden: Brill. 1995.
- HALAT Baumgartner, W. et al., *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*. 5 Bde. Leiden: Brill. 1967–1996. [3. Aufl.]
- LÄ Helck, W. und E. Otto (Hrsg.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*. 7 Bde. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. 1975–1992.
- RLA Streck, M. P. (Hrsg), *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie*. 12 Bde. Berlin: W. de Gruyter. 1932–2011. [Not Finished]

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