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Biographical Studies of Dahomey's King Ghezo and America's Malcolm X

Reprint of Interview with Boniface I. Obichere
(*Intercom*, 16:5 (1 February 1994), 1-5.)

Historian Boniface Obichere describes his current research projects, which focus on two very different leaders who exercised great influence in their times.

Obichere: The area of my work here is African history; I specialize in West African history. At the moment I'm engaged in two research projects, the first of which deals with the former kingdom of Dahomey (which was located in what is now southern Benin). I'm writing a biography of one of the most significant kings of the nineteenth century, Dahomey's King Ghezo. He ascended the throne in 1818 and ruled until 1858, which gave him a very long reign. His reign marked a high point of power and a turning point in the history of the kingdom. He compels my interest for several reasons. First, he lived to see the abolition of the slave trade, and he made his kingdom change from heavy economic reliance on the slave trade to legitimate trade in local products, such as palm oil. It was a difficult economic period, and the transition was not easy. Second, King Ghezo is also significant for his social policies, his approach to ruling his people. His economic policies and his control of the markets were quite effective. He established customs duties to be paid by traders passing by his kingdom, and he created some new administrative offices in the government, which were very important for the work of the kingdom. Some of those offices continue in existence today. Third, in the realm of the military, his reforms included the accelerated formation of military units made up of women, the *agodojie*, as they were called in Fon. Europeans called these female soldiers "Amazons." They were outstanding warriors, sometimes raiding all the way into present-day Nigeria and Ghana.

Editor: *The army had separate units for women?*

Yes, they had separate cavalry and infantry units for women. The

commanders of these units were also women. The king valued them highly and bought the best weapons for them.

What sort of weapons did they use?

Muskets, cannons, — by the 1850s, when they were attacking western Nigeria, they had cannons, Enfield rifles, and Austrian Matinis. They were very well armed.

Did neighboring countries also use female soldiers?

No, but Dahomey was a very small kingdom. They did not have enough men to carry out all their campaigns.

How important really was the slave trade to Dahomey's economy, and who were the slaves that they were dealing in?

The slave trade was extremely important to the economy. Dahomey was a predatory state. It made war on all its neighbors, and the war captives were sold as slaves to the Europeans. Dahomeyans sold captives to the English, Portuguese, French, and Dutch. The standing army was involved in constant warfare, the aim of which was just to capture people, not to kill them, so the Dahomeyans used scare tactics. They would sneak into a village at night and shoot into the air, frightening the inhabitants and flushing them out of their houses so they could be captured. The economy of Dahomey was completely dominated by the slave trade for about 200 years. When King Ghezo inherited the throne in 1818, talk of abolition was already in the air. The British sent ambassadors to discuss the proposed abolition with him. He was visited by a number of official delegations from England, and their written reports on their visits are preserved.

So you are able to find documentation about why King Ghezo changed his policy.

Yes, but he really had no other choice, because the Europeans were no longer going to buy slaves. He had to transform the internal policy of the kingdom from one of constant slave-raiding to one of production.

In other words, his motivation for ending slave raids was based on economics rather than moral conversion.

There was no moral objection to the slave trade in the kingdom because the Dahomeyans didn't think they were doing anything wrong. For the most part they didn't know the details of slave life in the New World. On one occasion, when an Englishman, John Duncan, tried to tell King Ghezo about the suffering of the slaves, Ghezo replied in effect: "I don't believe you, because here in our city of Whydah, we have many former slaves who have returned from the New World and are now active as merchants, and some of them are selling slaves. If it were such a bad thing, they wouldn't be selling slaves, because they were slaves themselves for 15 or 20 years before they returned." Duncan did not have a good answer to the king's reasoning. A number of former slaves from Brazil and the West Indies were living in Porto Novo and Whydah; some were employed by the king as secretaries, others were big merchants on the coast. Some of them had experienced the horrors of slavery in Brazil, but it was a thing of the past. Some of these former slaves, like Francisco Felix de Sousa, became major slave traders themselves. After Britain abolished slavery in 1833, the British navy seized about ten of de Sousa's slave ships. Other such slave traders who had been in the New World for extended periods of time were operating in Ashanti and other neighboring kingdoms, and King Ghezo had seen them conducting their business and had drawn his own conclusions.

What are your main sources of information for this study?

There are abundant written records in the ritis archives, in the Public Record Office in London, and there are mementos in the Royal Museum in Abomey, the capital of the former kingdom. Gifts that King Ghezo received over the years from different British companies—crystal, glassware, teapots, silverware, clothing, tunics, a chair donated by the British consul, beautifully carved with a crown of Queen Victoria—these have been preserved over the years. Some of the British visitors wrote books about their sojourns in West Africa. British and Portuguese diplomats reported on many aspects of life in the kingdom. The Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman, a black American Methodist missionary who visited King Ghezo, interviewed the king and wrote his own report. So there is a great deal of first-hand docu-

mentary material to add to the information available from the family histories and oral tradition. There are no written court records from the Dahomey side, but I interviewed the ministers of state and old people who had formerly served in the Dahomey government to find out what they knew about court life from their grandfathers. The people sing songs celebrating the activities of this king every August in an annual festival.

Another source is letters between King Ghezo and neighboring West African kings. Ghezo was interested in building local alliances. He was negotiating an alliance with Kosoko, the king of Lagos, and the letters they exchanged were carried by secret messengers. Several of the messengers were caught and searched, and the letters that were going from the king of Dahomey to the king of Lagos fell into the hands of Consul John Beecroft, and are now in the National Archives of Nigeria. These provide additional insight into events of the 1840s.

Could you comment further on Ghezo's domestic policies?

His policies were humane. He was under pressure from the British and from Reverend Freeman to modify the ceremonies that were held each year in the capital to honor the dead kings and ancestors. Human sacrifice was performed at these events, and King Ghezo was urged to abolish this practice. He ended up virtually abolishing capital punishment throughout the kingdom. His laws decreed that no local governors or chiefs could sentence anyone to death without permission from the royal palace. He also reduced the number of people who were sacrificed annually for ceremonial purposes.

King Ghezo's economic policies were practical and wise. He had an uncanny ability to comprehend what was happening in the wider world of his time and he rearranged his domestic policy to ensure the survival of his people. For example, during his reign the sale or export of palm kernels was at first forbidden, because palm kernels were used for food by the military. One of his officials, Mr. Huenu, the minister for trade (*ahisinon*), reported to the king that Europeans from France who were buying palm oil had expressed their desire to also purchase palm kernels. When the king called his ministers together to discuss this issue, the majority of them were opposed to selling palm kernels, citing their importance as a source of food for the soldiers. But Ghezo understood that the military campaigns would

no longer go on as before, because the Europeans were no longer buying slaves; they were now buying other kinds of products. Mr. Huenu suggested that the king should permit the selling of palm kernels. By increasing the harvesting and cracking of palm nuts, enough palm kernel could be produced to meet both foreign and domestic demands. So the villagers—men, women, and children—were organized to increase production, to the benefit of all.

Ghezo, he limited importation of hard liquor, which benefited his people. He also improved their lives by liberalizing other laws. The kings before him did not allow the ordinary people to plant the coconut in their compounds. That was a privilege reserved for chiefs. But because people loved coconut and the coconut was selling very well, Ghezo issued a law that allowed anybody to plant coconuts. Similarly, before Ghezo, honey was produced and given to the palace for the use of the military and the upper classes. Ghezo encouraged bee farming and the production of more honey so that supplies of honey would be sufficient for the whole population.

They were farming "Africanized" or "killer" bees?

Yes, African honey bees. However, it's rare for anyone to be stung to death. I've heard of such cases, but it's rare.

Coming back to King Ghezo, to what extent was he informed about other parts of the world?

He did not travel abroad himself, but he was well informed about other countries. He had considerable contact with people from abroad, and he wrote letters to foreign governments. He sent ambassadors to Brazil and Portugal. His ambassadors to Brazil were dispatched to search for his mother, who had been sold to European slave traders by his older half-brother, Adandozan. This half-brother had seized the throne after the death of their father, so Ghezo was compelled to organize his own supporters and take his throne back. Meanwhile, however, the brother had accused Ghezo's mother of being a sorcerer and had sold her to slave traders, who took her to Brazil. Her story is told in a book entitled *Agotime*.

Did Ghezo's ambassadors ever find his mother?

No, they never did.

King Ghezo remained an important and powerful figure throughout his life. He had a great deal of power, but somewhere along the line, the monarchy lost its power. When did this happen?

It happened after the French conquered the area and deposed the last king in 1894. From that time on, the power of the kings and the territory over which they held sway were curtailed. The king's power to tax was abolished. Under the French colonial system, he became just a figurehead.

Does the royal line of King Ghezo still exist?

Yes, it continues. I have a history book here written by one of his grandsons. The present king in Abomey (in Benin) is a descendant of the line. The dynasty is still there, but its power has been reduced. The country Benin has a representative, elected government. During colonialism, the powers of the kings were cut back by the French; but the royal family still lives in the same locality, and the museum of the royal family is maintained inside the old palace. UNESCO agencies have provided funds to restore parts of the old palace, especially the burial grounds of the early kings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Are there any photographs of King Ghezo?

There are very few photographs, but drawings and paintings of the king are contained in a number of books.

Do you have any idea what the population of Dahomey was at the time that Ghezo ruled?

Estimates vary. Edouard Foa of France extrapolated from the number of soldiers and said the population was about 1.5 million. I think that's a fair figure.

How does King Ghezo compare with the kings of that time in Nigeria?

There was a striking difference. The kings in Nigeria were generally regarded as divine monarchs, and they did not have as much impact on the actual administration of the country as the kings of Dahomey. They were ritual kings whose ministers dealt with the daily affairs of government. In my part of Nigeria, Igboland, there were separate village democracies rather than centralized kingships. In those parts of Nigeria where centralized kingships existed, the king was still insulated from direct access to his subjects by powerful ministers or through a spokesman who mediated all messages to and from the king. In contrast to this, King Ghezo was definitely a hands-on ruler who addressed the people directly, issued laws and decrees, and reviewed cases and served as a court of appeal for capital offenses.

Will this project result in a book?

Yes, it will be a book dealing with the life and times of King Ghezo. The first three chapters discuss the kingdom, the background of Ghezo's inherited throne, and the problems brought on by his brother as a usurper. Middle chapters will examine him as a reformer and analyze his diplomatic relations with Europeans and with African rulers, and the final chapters will cover his reaction to the abolition of the slave trade and the changes he brought about within his kingdom to deal with this situation. His significance was in governance—the governance of the people of Dahomey. He was very skilled in the political control of the population.

Jumping forward in time, your second research project deals with Malcolm X.

Yes, I'm doing a biographical study of Malcolm X and his relationship with the African politicians of his day. During three trips to Africa, he made many contacts with African heads of state. These experiences triggered a transformation in his philosophy, and I am studying that part of his life to see how this change came about. I believe very firmly that it came about because of his contact with these African rulers. Prior to these visits, he advocated complete separatism for black

Americans. In Africa, he visited black republics and saw that they could not exist in a political vacuum; they had to deal with the white world of Western Europe and America.

When did he visit Africa?

His first visit took place in 1959, and he made two more visits in 1964. So it wasn't simply his visit to Mecca that transformed him, as some have suggested. The trip to Mecca did have some effect, however, because on that occasion, he saw Muslims who were literally white people—Muslims from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia. When he returned to the United States, he told the Muslims in America that they should not be teaching the doctrine that white people cannot be Muslims. Some white people are Muslims. And of course he was aware of the shades of difference in skin color between the black Africans and the Arab Africans. But from his contacts with leaders of black African governments, he realized that his notion of separatism could not be carried to its logical end. The African governments, which existed inside the continent of Africa and had radical presidents, nevertheless maintained diplomatic and economic relations with the European world. He talked with Jomo Kenyatta, the president of Kenya, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the president of Nigeria, and he recognized that these men, who had fought colonialism and established the new states, still found it desirable to have contact with the Europeans. He saw that Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana had white advisers in his capital in Accra. These experiences profoundly affected Malcolm and modified his views.

Looking at the African configuration, he came to the conclusion that one could achieve a great deal without recourse to violence. Just prior to this change of heart, he had given his well known lecture in which he said that 1964 would be the year of the ballot or the bullet. But that summer he went to Africa and talked with all these experienced African leaders. Then he returned a second time to attend a general meeting of the Organization of African Unity, where all the heads of states were gathered, and they accorded him much prestige as the spokesman for Black America. While there, he interviewed the American ambassador to Kenya, which was remarkable because this was the Malcolm who wouldn't take part in a government meeting in the United States because the government was dominated by white people. The American ambassador in Nairobi at the time, Mr. William

Atwood, could hardly believe that he was talking to Malcolm X.

What sources are you using for information about Malcolm's change of heart?

I am using the reports of Maya Angelou and others who played a central role in Malcolm's stay in Ghana, Kenya, Egypt, and Nigeria. I am also using tapes of interviews and lectures that he gave, most of which have not been published in printed form. At my request the University Research Library at UCLA ordered the CIA and FBI reports on Malcolm X's activities during the Kennedy and Johnson years, so those materials are now available here. I have consulted African newspapers for reports on his speeches, and I have talked to the people he met with in Africa.

Which of your two projects is nearest completion?

I expect to complete the biography of King Ghezo first, but I am bringing both projects along as rapidly as possible.

* * *

Boniface Obichere received his B.A. and MA. from the University of Minnesota, and his doctorate from Oxford University. As a full professor in the UCLA History Department, he teaches Introduction to the Civilizations of Africa; Africa and the Slave Trade; Africa from 1945 to the Present; West Africa from Earliest Times to 1800; History of West Africa since 1800; Social and Economic History of West Africa since 1600; and special seminars for graduate students.

His academic pursuits have taken him to Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, Canada, South America, and Saudi Arabia. He is the author of Studies in Southern Nigerian History; West African States and European Expansion; and many articles on topics relating to the history of West Africa, including female soldiers in Dahomey, slavery and the slave trade in Dahomey and other West African countries, and the oil industry in Nigeria.

The first part of the history of the world is the history of the human race. It is a history of progress and of the struggle for existence. It is a history of the triumph of the human mind over the forces of nature and of the human will over the forces of fate.

The second part of the history of the world is the history of the human mind. It is a history of the development of the human intellect and of the human spirit. It is a history of the discovery of truth and of the pursuit of knowledge.

The third part of the history of the world is the history of the human will. It is a history of the development of the human character and of the human soul. It is a history of the triumph of the human will over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The fourth part of the history of the world is the history of the human soul. It is a history of the development of the human conscience and of the human heart. It is a history of the triumph of the human soul over the forces of sin and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The fifth part of the history of the world is the history of the human heart. It is a history of the development of the human emotions and of the human feelings. It is a history of the triumph of the human heart over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The sixth part of the history of the world is the history of the human emotions. It is a history of the development of the human passions and of the human desires. It is a history of the triumph of the human emotions over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The seventh part of the history of the world is the history of the human passions. It is a history of the development of the human desires and of the human hopes. It is a history of the triumph of the human passions over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The eighth part of the history of the world is the history of the human desires. It is a history of the development of the human hopes and of the human dreams. It is a history of the triumph of the human desires over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The ninth part of the history of the world is the history of the human hopes. It is a history of the development of the human dreams and of the human aspirations. It is a history of the triumph of the human hopes over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The tenth part of the history of the world is the history of the human dreams. It is a history of the development of the human aspirations and of the human ideals. It is a history of the triumph of the human dreams over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The eleventh part of the history of the world is the history of the human aspirations. It is a history of the development of the human ideals and of the human virtues. It is a history of the triumph of the human aspirations over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.

The twelfth part of the history of the world is the history of the human virtues. It is a history of the development of the human character and of the human soul. It is a history of the triumph of the human virtues over the forces of passion and of the human spirit over the forces of fate.