

Short Paper

What Became of Horse Y?

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“For the accommodation of myself and my wife, the missionary of the American Baptist Mission, Mr. Priest, had kindly provided two horses of pure African breed. Mine was so small that my feet nearly touched the ground and it was with great difficulty, when I went down a steep place that I could keep from falling over his head on to mine. But this equine pigmy carried me seven miles with so much ease that at times he was even unruly. His strength and endurance were truly wonderful”.

What Happened To The Yoruba Horse? This is a veritable equestrian whodunit! [1]

This is a very interesting question. Yorubas had tamed the horse for centuries, nay millennia. Mounted terracotta Nok figures dating to 2,000 years ago have been unearthed [2]. At the 1886 peace treaty British officials recorded the presence of many horses and their “colourful trappings” [3]. So what happened to the Yoruba horse? Here the British government is to blame again. We have to understand that when Britain took Yorubaland in 1886, the motor car was in its infancy. Horse riding was the prerogative of the white upper class British and a symbol of colonialism. The British did not like the idea of black, colonized people cavorting on horses. Before British colonization there were two species of horses in Yorubaland. The homegrown Yoruba horse and the Arabian horse. The majority of Yorubas rode the homegrown Yoruba horse which was short compared to the Arabian horse which was taller [4]. The Yoruba elite [Yoruba kings, chiefs and military commanders] rode the Arabian type. Kurunmi of Ijaye and Ogunmola of Ibadan are recorded to have ridden Arabian horses. The Yoruba middle class rode the shorter Yoruba horse. The American Baptist missionary William H Clarke compared this horse breed to the American mustang which is a short horse. This horse was so short that when the six feet tall American missionary Richard Henry Stone rode one, he reported that his legs were nearly touching the ground! It is safe to say that this species of horse does not exist again today. At least not in its pristine form. A few years ago I took riding lessons at the Ibadan Polo club. I dropped out after a few weeks because I could no longer afford it. While I was there all the horses I saw at their stables were the tall Arabian types. Although I saw some I suspected were hybrids.

BADA

Before colonization, mounted Yoruba soldiers were called “Bada” [knights]. The British did not like the idea of Yoruba knights or Yoruba

cavalry of any kind. I suspect that the same way the British collected Snider rifles, rockets and The Gatling gun from Ogedengbe and his soldiers in 1895 is the same way the British rounded up and shot all The Yoruba horses. I can't put it past them. The British told The Yorubas they would now ride the railway. This was at best a half-truth because the railway was mostly used to transport raw materials. Only Yoruba kings were allowed to keep their [Arabian] horses. It will be a task for a future historian to investigate what exactly the British did to the Yoruba horse. SHAME ON BRITAIN! In the 1852 dictionary of the Yoruba language compiled by Bishop (then still Reverend) Ajayi Crowther “Bada” is defined as “a title” [page 51]. All references to the horse and militarism has been erased. This was just a year after Britain took Lagos. The British did not want Yorubas having any “funny” ideas. In the 1913 Dictionary of Yoruba printed by the Church Missionary Society the word “bada” is not featured at all. The British wanted Yorubas to forget about the horse.

References

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