

The Pye collection from Northern Nigeria

## Lieutenant Francis John Pye (1871-1916)

Pye came from a large working class family in Woolwich, and joined the Royal Fusiliers aged 29. In 1902 he fought in the Battle of Abuja, Nigeria, with the West Africa Frontier Force. A year later he donated 19 objects to the Museum, including horseriding gear. He had planned to marry a Plymouth woman, but died in action in East Africa during World War I.

Powerful men controlled access to horses in Islamic Northern Nigeria. The Emir (leader) rode an elaborately decorated horse. The high-status items on display belonged to the third Emir of Abuja, who was killed in the 1902 conflict. Pye may have been awarded the objects as spoils of war, or they may have been looted.

In order to give a detailed picture of the circumstances which will help to account for the significance of the horse furniture and other items given by Lt Pye to the Plymouth Museum in 1903, it will be necessary to sketch in the main developments leading to the expedition of 1902 to Abuja in Northern Nigeria.

In 1879 George Taubman Goldie, an ambitious trader, formed the United Africa Company (reformed in 1882 as the National African Company, and later the Niger Company) to trade along the reaches of the River Niger above its confluence with the River Benue, in what was later to be known as Northern Nigeria (see Maps). The Berlin Conference of 1884/85, attended by representatives from the major European nations to thrash out the relative division of the African continent between themselves, established the right of all nations to trade in the Niger valley. However, by that time, the Niger Company, although nominally a trading company, had effectively assumed control of vast tracts of land, from the Hausa states in the north and west to the oil rivers in the south-east. Its pseudo-Colonial position was consolidated in 1886 through Royal patronage, the Company was thence known as the Royal Niger Company. It was granted (by the British Parliament?) the right to levy customs duties, backed up by fines imposed through a judicial operation with the necessary Court system and Chief Justice. Of course this required a constabulary, initially of 400 men, rising to 1000.

In January 1897 a force of 500 constabulary left Lokoja, its HQ at the Niger/Benue confluence under Goldie, to attack Bida, the capital of the Islamic Nupe kingdom. This was ostensibly because of the slave raiding activities of Etsu Nupe (the Paramount Chief of the Nupe people of Bida) among “the pagan dependencies”, over which the Royal Niger Company had assumed some form of responsibility. Goldie successfully took over Bida and declared an end to the Etsu Nupe’s rule over the former Nupe hinterland. In this way he was able to keep other European forces at bay, whether the French or those of the Lagos Protectorate at the coast. The opposing military forces were by no means equal: Nupe cavalry was no match for the Company’s machine guns. The legal basis of this action was dubious. The British government had to legitimise the situation, first by creating locally-recruited military unit, the West African Frontier Force, with its HQ at Jebba and commanded by Col Lugard; secondly by replacing the jurisdiction of the Royal Niger Company with the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. It took over on the first day of the new century, with Sir Frederick Lugard as High Commissioner. The Royal Niger Company reverted to being a trading company.

Lugard immediately commenced the subjugation (or, as the British termed it, the pacification) of the peoples of his territory (Quote in *Chronicle of Abuja*, p25, from a letter from Lugard to the Chief of Zuba, a town near Abuja, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1900, in response to a refusal to grant admittance to a white man to the town: “I tell you that we are rulers of the world. If a man does aught by night, we know of it by morning; if by day we know of it by night, you may be sure of that. Therefore take heed of your behaviour”). Like Goldie before him, he needed to deal with rival European activities, particularly

those of the French who had occupied Borno in the North-East near Lake Chad. He formed an expedition under Col Morland, starting from the Benue in February 1902, northwards to Bauchi, with a Political Officer, William Wallace in tow. It had been reported that the Emir of Bauchi had enslaved some of the inhabitants in one of his own towns. He was deposed and replaced with his heir. The expedition then captured a Mallam, Jibrella at Gombe, who had declared himself a Mahdi, or Rightly Guided One. The force went on to retake Borno from the French, and returned to Lokoja in June 1902.

Also in June 1902, an African missionary was killed in Abuja. This precipitated another expedition against the Emir of Abuja, Ibrahim Iyalai, who was captured. The expedition went on to deal with unrest at Keffi. It was this action in which Lt Pye was involved, presumably gathering the majority of the artefacts which are now in Plymouth Museum. According to a label attached to the umbrella, the expedition took place in August and September. The label also includes the statement that the umbrella was “ found at Abachi after the capture of Sirikin Abuja, to which town he fled when defeated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn N N Regiment” However, on another object given by Lt Pye, is a label “HAUSA SHIRT belonging to the Sirikin Abuja who was killed while effecting his capture at Abachi...”. The *Chronicle of Abuja*, written in Hausa in 1944 by two brothers of Sulaimanu Barau, the Emir of Abuja at that time, and subsequently translated into English, describes the event in matter-of-fact terms: “.. the Emir fled to the Abachi Hills rather than fall into the hands of the British. There was a little fighting in the village where he had taken refuge, and in it Ibrahim was mortally wounded. The soldiers took up his body and brought it back to the town where he was buried in the compound of Wagu. So died the last independent Emir of Abuja” (p.26). The Emirate of Abuja was one of the last Hausa states to remain independent of the Fulani Caliphate or Empire. Abuja was created by the younger brother of the Hausa Emir of Zaria, a large city state further north in Nigeria. The Hausa rulers of Zaria had been driven out by the forces of the Fulani leader Othman Dan Fodio from Sokoto, who fought a jihad or Holy War throughout what is now Northern Nigeria in the early 1800s. The town of Abuja was founded in 1825. It fought against Fulani domination continually during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was proud of its Hausa history. The independence referred to in the Chronicle was independence from the Fulani, as much as from the British. A more trenchant expression of the events of 1902 comes from a recent history of Nigeria: “The violence of colonialism affected many who did not directly suffer from it.... The policy of those emirs who chose not to resist was undoubtedly influenced by the fate of those who did. Ibrahim, Emir of Kontagora, was taken to Lokoja in chains, which created insecurity and distrust in Nupe” (Isichei, E. *A History of Nigeria*, p.372). It is also important to realise that the number of British soldiers who fought in these actions was very small. The expedition to Abuja and Keffi consisted of six British officers (including Pye), four NCOs, 213 other ranks, predominantly African, and one doctor.

The collection comprises the following:

1903.30.1 shirt [no detail or image]	1903.30.10 umbrella, silk damask covering
1903.30.2 robe, brown cotton cloth with leather amulets	1903.30.11 belt [no detail or image]
1903.30.3 robe blue cotton cloth with leather amulets and red cord, said to have belonged to Sirikin Abuja (not a high quality item, probably a war tunic)	1903.30.12 iron staff with three bells at top; said to be Hausa, but more likely Yoruba
1903.30.4 saddle cloth, including red wool and other applique	1903.30.13 bow
1903.30.5 saddle cloth, blue cotton cloth backing	1903.30.14 spear, Northern Nigerian form
1903.30.6 cotton square with Islamic script	1903.30.15 spear, Northern Nigerian form
1903.30.7 bit and reins [no detail or image]	1903.30.16 spear, Northern Nigerian form
1903.30.8 bridle, tinned decorative elements	1903.30.17 spear, Northern Nigerian form
1903.30.9 martingale, with two purple velvet panels	1903.30.18 spear, East African form
	1903.30.19 spear, [no detail or image]

SULAIMANU  
BARAU  
6th EMIR  
OF ABUJA



The precise details of how Lt Pye came to give these things to the Museum is not known. As far as can be ascertained, he had no previous connection with the English south-west: the donors list also includes the name Anerley, in South London in connection with him. However, since the collection was accessioned into the Museum in 1903, it is likely that Pye left for England soon after the Keffi/Abuja expedition. He probably travelled by foot or river boat to the coast, then by ship to England. This journey would have taken a couple of months.

It is not clear at present what other actions Lt Pye took part in. Military stations were established at Kontagora and Zaria later in 1902. Then action later focussed on the larger urban centres of Kano and Sokoto, both of which were occupied by the West Africa Frontier Force in 1903. The collection has a narrow range; 14 of the items are clearly from the region of Northern Nigeria in which Lt Pye saw action in 1902. It is likely that these 14 items were acquired either in Abuja itself or in the garrison town of Lokoja on the confluence of the Niger and Benue, about 160 kilometres (100 miles) south of Abuja. The items about which there is more ambiguity include the iron staff (1903.30.12) which is likely to have been used by a Yoruba priest; although it would not have been used in an Islamic context, it is possible it was acquired in the area of Northern Nigeria south of the Yoruba town of Ilorin. No details are at present available on the belt (1903.30.11), the bit and reins (1903.30.7) or the spear (1903.30.19) to determine their origin; they could well be from the Abuja/Abachi district, the same area as the majority of the collection. Only the spear (1903.30.18) is definitely not from Nigeria; it is clearly of an East African form.





The last British Governor of Northern Nigeria, Sir Gawain Bell being welcomed in 1957 by the Emir of Kano, with attendants on horseback (from Allison P. "Life in the White Man's Grave" Viking, London: 1988)

Parade on horseback is an essential element of feast days. This is a description of the Sallah festival in Nupe, equivalent to Eid, the ending of Ramadan: "On the first day the king on horseback under the state umbrella and surrounded by his noblemen and state officials, leads the vast procession to the praying ground outside the town" (Ibid, p.143). The horse is adorned with the most elaborately decorated apparel money can buy. The brass-workers of Bida were, and still are, among the most highly skilled craftsmen in Nigeria; one of their stocks-in-trade, together with weaponry, bowls and other receptacles, was glittering horse furniture. Nadel says "The large orders of former days, for arms, sumptuous horse-trappings, ornaments of many kinds, have disappeared...but on a limited scale the court is still the most important customer of the Bida brass-smiths" (Ibid, p.273). Saddle cloths were a skilled product of the tailor and needleworker: "A simple saddle-cloth takes from three to five days to make; the cost of the material is 6d, and it is sold for 1s or 1s 6d. A more elaborate cloth, embroidered and dyed in various colours, takes twenty days to make; the cost of the material is 3s, and it is sold for 10s" (Ibid. p.287). Although Nadel deals with the organisation of craft work in considerable detail, he does not specify the costs of importing special fabrics which Nupe artisans did not manufacture, such as the red woollen cloth (possibly the famous Stroud cloth, that clothed the British army in scarlet tunics) or the damask silk cloth which are such conspicuous elements of the umbrella and the saddle cloths. The presence of these fabrics would have raised the status of the owners and those who were seen showing them off still further.

The label attached to the umbrella provides a couple of intriguing insights. The complete text reads: "Keffi-Abuja Expedition Aug/Sept 1902 Northern Nigeria. Umbrella presented to the Sirikin of ABUJA by the Royal Niger Co.(being one of six given to the principal Sirikis of the above colony then under their Protectorate) and found at ABACHI after the capture of the Sirikin ABUJA to which town he fled when defeated by 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn N. N. Regiment in this expedition The approximate value would be 6 slaves [signed] F.J.Pye Lt 2NN W.A.F.F." "Sirikin" or "Sarkin" is the Hausa word for 'king' or 'chief'. The fact that only six of these umbrellas were given out by the Royal Niger Company indicates the status accorded to Abuja at that time (sometime between 1886, when the Royal Niger Company was created, and 1900). It would be useful to know which the other five

Emirates were. The statement concerning its value in slaves is revealing in two ways; first that ‘a slave’ was a unit of value, and secondly that it was thought significant by Lt Pye to include this information on the label. However, he may have been following a form of valuation that was commonly used in Abuja, at this time. Historically, one of the principal functions of the Abuja Emirate in relation to the other six original Hausa Emirates was as supplier of slaves (*Chronicle of Abuja*, p.viii). Abuja therefore may well have been accustomed to value other items in terms of their equivalent in slaves, and communicated this to Lt Pye at the time he took control of the umbrella. Of course what is not known at present is what the circumstances were which led to the items which were later given to the Plymouth museum “finding their way” into his possession. Were they given to him as one of the senior officers of the expedition? Were they taken by him as war booty? Given that the leaders in Abuja in 1944 were keen to set down the history of the Emirate then, might there be individuals alive in 2007 in Abuja who may be able to throw some light on these circumstances? A recent complicating factor in researching this may be that since 1992 Abuja has been transformed beyond all recognition: it is now the capital of Nigeria, a newly elevated metropolis. This is bound to have swamped its former significance as one of the three remaining Hausa Emirates of this ancient Islamic region.

#### References:

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