

## TRAVELLER'S GUIDE TO OFFA, KWARA STATE

Inga Grosveld

*retired teacher, Adesoye College, Offa*

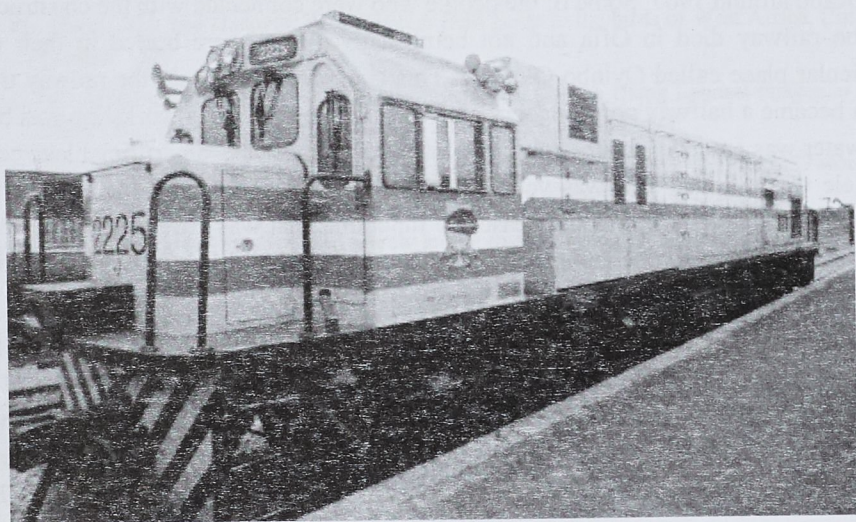


Offa, a town situated right at the cross roads between north and south, was formerly part of the Northern Region. It was through Offa that the railway was planned to link Lagos and Kano around 1907. Some of the people who were connected with the construction of the railway died in Offa and not being natives they were buried in their own particular place called Oyinbo Okukale. This is appropriately near the railway track. Offa became a halfway point for servicing the locomotives and a workshop was built. As water was essential for the running of steam locomotives, an artificial lake called Afalele was excavated. It was very useful for a few decades until the train service became irregular and in the end ceased to function. That was around 1994 when the Adesoye students travelled to and from Jos by train for their Man O' War Camp at the Shere Hills for the last time.

In 2012 the trains started to function again with diesel power which do not need the lake water. However, people have not forgotten the Afelele Lake. They cleared it of the common water hyacinth that covered it like a carpet and tried to turn it into a fishery. Unfortunately, it did not succeed but some enterprising people have started a garden centre nearby which seems to be attracting customers with its variety of plants. There



is a white rock with an iron rod stuck into it to mark the place. It is the unknown people's burial ground.





### The Baobab Trees

These baobab trees have a special place in the town. There are just two of them, one in front of the palace and the other in a place called Alubata. They are both mighty in girth. The one in front of the palace is the larger: thirty people holding hands can just about enfold it. It is supposed to be about 300 years old, standing like a guardian at the entrance to the Olofa's palace.





The other baobab in Alubata has a traditional function. A girl to be married had to be a virgin and it was her duty to dance round the tree to confirm her state of purity before she could be taken to her husband's home. The baobab is a very unusual solitary tree found in the savanna with flowers on eight to nine inch stalks. The fruits are about ten inches long with a yellowish felted outside and pulp used in various ways for preparing drinks and food. The young leaves can be used for making soup. The inner bark is good for making ropes as well as strings for musical instruments. People say it is a tree for the famine season when there is no rain and food is scarce.





There are special groves where certain trees are found. The baobab is one of such trees. The other trees are: the iroko, which is called the king of trees; the silk cotton tree (*Igi araba*) good for its kapok to stuff pillows; the pawpaw tree (*ibepe*, Yoruba)).



The Golf Course.

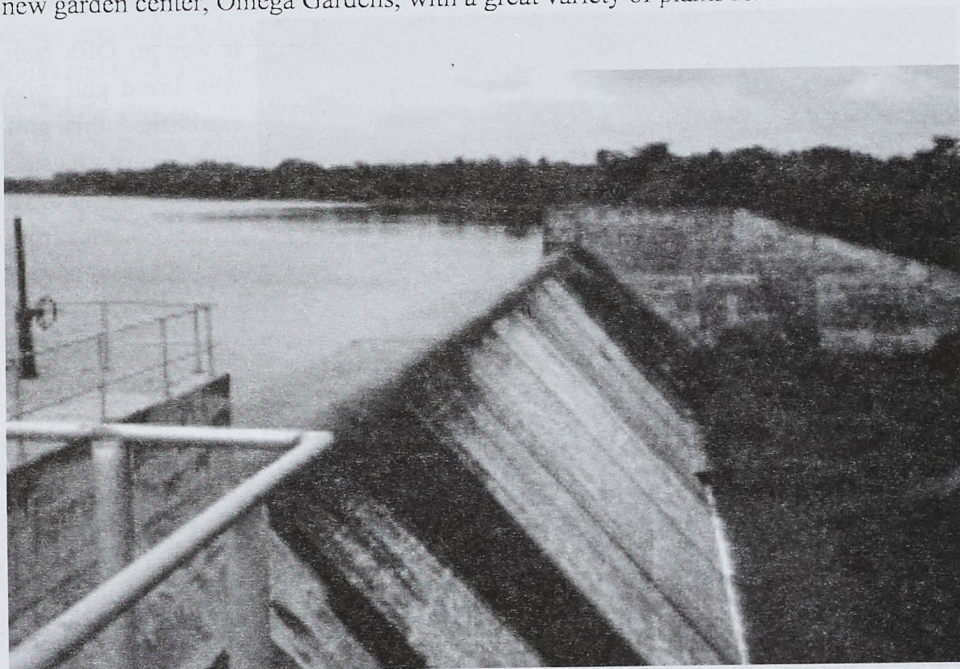
It was an Offa man who loved golf who established this golf course just outside Igosun, a small town about 5 km from Offa. The site is very attractive with undulating hills, trees and a stream. While the land was being cleared and grass planted, it was the home of the Patas monkeys. There must have been many other animals which also lost their habitat because of the golf course. Fortunately, this area is still home to many birds. It also provides a peaceful spot for the citizens of Offa to spend their leisure enjoy the beauties of the landscape.





### The Oyun Dam and the Water Reservoir

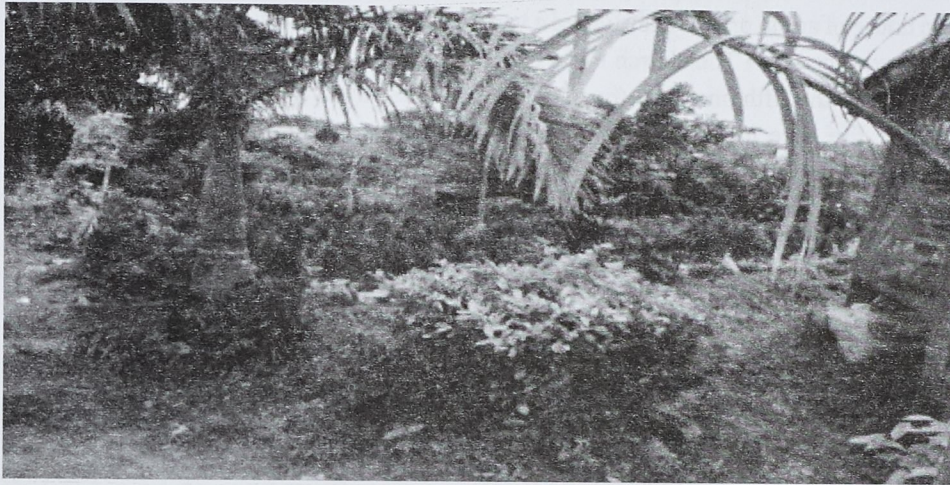
This place supplies the whole of Offa with water when it is fully functional. It is on the way to Ajase-Ipo, about 5km out of Offa. At the entrance to the turning there is a fine new garden center, Omega Gardens, with a great variety of plants for sale.



Omega gardens.



The actual dam and reservoir are about a kilometer along a dirt road. In the rainy season the water gushes over the dam, but in the dry season there is only a trickle. The actual reservoir is worth visiting.



It is quite extensive and usually there are quite a number of different birds to be seen. In the dry season you will see visitors from the winter in Europe: I have seen wild ducks in large numbers with their young as well as other water fowl. The vegetation includes wild mint and other herbs. For people who like bird watching and botanising the place offers a lot of interest.

### **Offa Grammar School**

Founded in Offa in 1943 it is the oldest community school in Northern Nigeria. The school has produced a great number of students who have become the pride of the people of Offa. The Old Students of the school can never forget what the school has done for them, so they have been supporting the school both financially and morally. It has not been easy for the administration of the school to cope with the large number of students and yet they can be proud of their results. Things are now looking up for the school: an extensive building program is about to commence funded by the Central Bank.

### **RC Church 100 years old**

St. Cyprian's Catholic Church in Offa is on the corner of the junction to the railway station and Taiwo Road. On the 6<sup>th</sup> July 16, 2012 it celebrated its 100th anniversary.



Some Offa indigenes who had worked in Abeokuta and Lagos came home and having been exposed to the influence of Christianity, formed a community of Catholics in 1907. Little by little this community grew and then missionaries came to help with the services once or twice a month on foot or by bicycle. The first Mass was celebrated in the house of an Ifa priest. They turned a yam mortar upside down, put a cloth over it and there was the altar! The church had a resident priest as from 1925. The present church building is the fifth one, the others having been destroyed by storm, constant use and finally, fire. The name of the church is very appropriate. Cyprian was a bishop of Carthage in north Africa, a learned man who wrote a number of books. He was finally martyred and cononised, his name still remembered in Africa and beyond.

### The Central Mosque

The mosque is situated opposite the Olofa's Palace. It is a very impressive building with its four minarets. It was constructed in three stages and is constantly being renovated. Islam in the town of Offa goes back to the southward missionary journeys of the Fulani Usman Dan Fodio. Most of the Oba (kings) have been Moslems so it is not surprising that the mosque is so close to the palace.

The Olofa's palace is now the show piece of Offa. The newly elected king being a modern man felt he had to have a suitable residence. An



architect by profession, he was quite clear in his mind what sort of palace he wanted



built. The compound is quite extensive and there are many buildings for different purposes: the main building; the pavilion; Kaa Moremi; the Royal stage; guest quarters; an office complex; tomb of past royal fathers; recreation center and an orchard. The main entrance to the palace is not to be mistaken for the entrance of an ordinary mortal's home.



The entrance to the Olofa's Palace.

It is the tradition that the king to be crowned must first of all stay some time in the palace of the Essa or prime minister, an important figure in the traditional government. At the coronation there must always be a mock wrestling match between the king and his prime minister: the Ijakadi. The palace of the Essa is in no way as imposing as the king's, but it is still an important looking building. He emphasizes his status by having a list of all the past Essa in front of the palace.





The Olaofa's Palace. The King surely lives like a king.



The Essa's palace.



| <b>LIST OF PAST CHIEFS</b> |                        |               |
|----------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| <b>S/<br/>No</b>           | <b>Names</b>           | <b>Period</b> |
| 1                          | ESSA AJIBOLA IGBAROODA | 1747-1845     |
| 2                          | ESSA IJA OYE           | 1845-1868     |
| 3                          | ESSA ISIOLUDA          | 1868-1888     |
| 4                          | ESSA OLAJODE           | 1888-1926     |
| 5                          | ESSA ONIFADE           | 1926-1936     |
| 6                          | ESSA OLABO OYE I       | 1937-1947     |
| 7                          | ESSA KELANI OYELEKE I  | 1949-1971     |
| 8                          | ESSA BUSARI OYEWALE    | 1971-1980     |
| 9                          | ESSA KOLA OLABO OYE II | 1980-1992     |
| 10                         | ESSA MOH. OYELEKE II   | 1992-1999     |
| 11                         | ESSA                   | 1999-         |

The observant visitor will find much of interest in Offa and its environs. The market is a prime source not only of goods, but also of information!