Society of Young Nigerian Writer

Yoruba Fact-Finder

Compilations of Yoruba History, culture and tradition

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HISTORY OF THE YORUBA PEOPLE

The history of the Yorubas is not yet well established. Based to a large extent on the dynastic tradition of the formerly dominant Oyo clan, it is presently in the process of re-evaluation.

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[Ancient history]

The African peoples who lived in Yorubaland, at least by the seventh century BC, were not initially known as the Yoruba, although they shared a common ethnicity and language group. Both archeology and traditional Yoruba oral historians confirm the existence of people in this region for several millennia. The Yoruba spiritual heritage maintains that the Yoruba ethnic groups are a unique people who originally settled at Ile-Ife. Legend holds that Oduduwa created the world at this place by delegation from the High God, Olorun. The name “Yoruba” is said to be an adaptation of “euroba” (or arabism).

Some contemporary historians contend that the leading Yoruba are not indigenous to Yorubaland, but are descendants of immigrants to the region from the ancient Near East. According to the dynastic tradition of Oyo, the people left Mecca, under the leadership of Oduduwa, and reached Yorubaland towards 600 BCE where they established the kingdom of Ife.[1] Oduduwa’s relatives are then believed to have subsequently established kingdoms in the rest of Yorubaland. One of his sons, Oranmiyan, took the throne of Oyo and expanded the Oduduwa dynasty eastwards. Further expansion led to the
establishment of the Yoruba in what are now Southwest Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, with Yoruba city-states acknowledging the spiritual primacy of the ancient city of Ile Ife. The southeastern Benin Empire, ruled by a dynasty that traced its ancestry to Ooduan royal house but which was largely populated by the Edo and other related ethnicities, also held considerable sway in the election of nobles and kings in eastern Yorùbáland.

**Yoruba origin mythology**

of the Yoruba kingdoms and that this is why he is credited with the achievement.[2]

Recently, historians have attributed this cosmological mythology to a pre-existing civilization at Ilé-Ifé which was invaded by a militant band of immigrants from the east, led by a king named Oduduwa. In this version of events, Oduduwa and his group of followers had been persecuted on the basis of religious differences and forced out of their homeland. They came to Ilé-Ifè, where they came across Oreluere and his subjects. Other informants are convinced that Oduduwa and his followers were subjugated by the pre-existing Igbo, whom local informants relate to the present Igbo people, though this claim has not been supported by competent historians.

**After Oduduwa**

**Oduduwa**

Upon the "disapearing act" of Oduduwa, there was a dispersal of his children from Ilé-Ifè to found the kingdoms Owu, Ketu, Benin, Ila, Sabe, Popo, Awori, Ondo and Oyo). Each made a mark in the subsequent urbanization and consolidation of what became the Yoruba confederacy of kingdoms, with each kingdom tracing its origin to Ille-Ife.[3]

**Golden age**
Between 1100 CE and 1700 CE, the Yoruba Kingdom of Ife experienced a golden age. It was then surpassed by the Oyo Empire as the dominant Yoruba military and political power between 1600 CE and 1800 CE. The nearby kingdom of Benin was also a powerful force between 1300 and 1850 CE.

Most of the city states were controlled by Obas, elected priestly monarchs, and councils made up of Oloyes, recognised leaders of royal, noble and, often, even common descent, who joined them in ruling over the kingdoms through a series of guilds and cults. Different states saw differing ratios of power between the kingship and the chiefs' council. Some, such as Oyo, had powerful, autocratic monarchs with almost total control, while in others such as the Ijebu city-states, the senatorial councils were supreme and the Oba served as something of a figurehead.

In all cases, however, Yoruba monarchs were subject to the continuing approval of their constituents as a matter of policy, and could be easily compelled to abdicate for demonstrating dictatorial tendencies or incompetence. The order to vacate the throne was usually communicated through an aroko or symbolic message, which usually took the form of parrots’ eggs delivered in a covered calabash bowl by the senators.

**Modern history**

**Map of Yoruba people, West Africa (Nigeria), 1898**

The Yoruba eventually established a federation of city-states under the political ascendancy of the city state of Oyo, located on the Northern fringes of Yorubaland in the savanna plains between the forests of present Southwest Nigeria and the Niger River.

Following a Jihad led by Uthman Dan Fodio and a rapid consolidation of the Hausa city states of contemporary northern Nigeria, the Fulani Sokoto Caliphate invaded and annexed the buffer Nupe Kingdom. It then began to advance southwards into Oyo lands. Shortly afterwards, its armies overran the Yoruba military capital of Ilorin, and then sacked and destroyed Oyo-Ile, the royal seat of the Oyo Empire.
Following this, Oyo-Ile was abandoned, and the Oyo retreated south to the present city of Oyo (formerly known as "Ago d'Oyo", or "Oyo Atiba") in a forested region where the cavalry of the Sokoto Caliphate was less effective. Further attempts by the Sokoto Caliphate to expand southwards were checked by the Yoruba who had rallied in defence under the military leadership of the ascendant Ibadan clan, which rose from the old Oyo Empire, and of the Ijebu city-states. However, the Oyo hegemony had been dealt a mortal blow. The other Yoruba city-states broke free of Oyo dominance, and subsequently became embroiled in a series of internecine conflicts that soon metamorphosed into a full scale civil war. These events weakened the southern Yorubas in their resistance to British colonial and military invasions. In 1960, greater Yorubaland was subsumed into the Federal Republic of Nigeria [4]. The historical records of the Yoruba, which became more accessible in the nineteenth century with the more permanent arrival of the Europeans, tell of heavy Jihad raids by the mounted Fulani warriors of the north as well as of endemic intercity warfare amongst the Yoruba themselves. Archaeological evidence of the greatness of their ancient civilization in the form of, amongst other things, impressive architectural achievements like Sungbo’s Eredo that are centuries old, nevertheless abound.[5]

**Etymology**

During the 19th century, the term Yoruba or Yariba came into wider use, first confined to the Oyo. The term is often believed to be derived from a Hausa ethnonym for the populous people to their south, but this has not been substantiated by historians.

As an ethnic description, the word first appeared in a treatise written by the Songhai scholar Ahmed Baba (16th century) and is likely to derive from the indigenous ethnonyms Oyo (Oyo) or Yagba, two Yoruba-speaking groups along the northern borders of their territory. However, it is likely that the ethnonym was popularized by Hausa usage and ethnography written in Arabic and Ajami. Under the influence of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba clergyman of considerable eminence, subsequent missionaries extended the term to include all speakers of related dialects.
Before the abolition of the slave trade, some Yoruba groups were known among Europeans as Akú, a name derived from the first words of Yoruba greetings such as Ẹ kú àáro? ‘good morning’ and Ẹ kú ẹlẹ? ‘good evening.’ This term has survived in certain parts of their diaspora as a self-descriptive.

References

Wikimedia Commons has media related to: Yoruba

3. ^ Yoruba Alliance:Who are the Yoruba?

Bibliography

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