ODUDUWA, THE ANCESTOR OF THE CROWNED

YORUBA KINGS

Oduduwa, phonetically written as Odùduwà, and sometimes contracted as Odudua, Oòdua, is generally held among the Yoruba to be the ancestor of the crowned Yoruba kings.

Several legends concerning the origin and ancestry of Oduduwa abound in Yoruba and Benin mythology. The Yorubas believe he is the father of the Yoruba’s and progenitor of all Yoruba Oba's and the Oba of Benin. The Benin believe that he is a Benin prince called EKALADERHAN who was banished by his father, the Ogiso of Benin. His name, the Benins claim, is derived from 'Idoduwa", a Benin word meaning fortune's path, symbolizing the painful exile from his ancestral home. In support of this, they claim, Oduduwa's son Oranmiyan later returned to Benin to rule the Empire around 1,000 AD. Oduduwa is believed to have had several sons (16 in number) who later became powerful traditional rulers of Yoruba land, most notably Alafin of Oyo, Oni of Ife, Oragun of Ila, Owa of Ilesha, Alake of Abeokuta and Osemawe of Ondo. Yoruba tradition holds that Oduduwa fled from Mecca to Ile-Ife, bringing with him the Ifa religion which was under persecution in Mecca. He established it firmly in Ile-Ife and founded the Ogboni cult to protect the ancient customs and institutions of his people. The Oduduwa shrine is still worshipped today in Ile-Ife as the cradle of Yoruba culture.

Oral history of the Oyo-Yoruba recount the coming of Oduduwa from the east, sometimes understood by Muslim sources as the "vicinity" or direction of Mecca, but more likely signifying the region of Ekiti and Okun sub-ethnics in northeastern Yorubaland/central Nigeria. A strong theory among the Yoruba is that Oduduwa came from the region of Egypt or Nubia and may
have been fleeing from religious persecution or invasion, possibly coinciding with the Greek invasion and colonization of Egypt in the 4th century BCE. Oduduwa is presumed to have entered the Ekiti-Yoruba and Okun-Yoruba region. This region is near the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, and is where the Yoruba language is presumed to have separated from related ethno-linguistic groups like Igalà, Igbo, and Edo.

The Ife oral traditions, on the other hand, tell that Odùduwà was the son of the supreme god Olodumare or Olorun, and was sent by him from heaven to create the earth. (Another version of this myth ascribes these episodes to Obatala, casting Oodua, as an usurper).

Descending from the heavens via a chain let down to Ile Ife, Obatala brought with him a cockerel, a pigeon, and a calabash full of dirt. After throwing the soil upon the waters, he set the cockerel and pigeon on the pile of dirt that, in turn, scratched and scattered it around to create the rest of dry land that became the Earth's surface.

Odùduwà subsequently became one of the first kings of Ife, and then sent his sons out with crowns to rule over all of the other Yorùbá kingdoms, which is why all royal Yorùbá lineages claim direct descent from Odùduwà and refer to the Ooni of Ife as first among equals (popularly rendered in the Latin phrase *primus inter pares* in Nigeria).

Ile Ife continues to be considered the spiritual capital of the Yoruba.

**References**