Society of Young Nigerian Writer

Yoruba Fact-Finder

Compilations of Yoruba History, culture and tradition

Compiled by:
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Yoruba Language

*Official status*

| Official language in | Nigeria |

*Language codes*

| ISO 639-1     | yo      |
| ISO 639-2     | yor     |
| ISO 639-3     | yor     |

Yorùbá (native name èdè Yorùbá, 'the Yorùbá language') is a Niger–Congo language spoken in West Africa by approximately 20 million speakers. The native tongue of the Yoruba people, is spoken, among other languages, in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo and in communities in other parts of Africa, Europe and the Americas. A variety of the language, Lucumi, from olukunmi is used as the liturgical language of the Santeria religion of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. It is most closely related to the Owo Itsekiri language spoken in the Niger-Delta and Igala spoken in central Nigeria.

Contents
• 1 History

• 2 Varieties

• 3 Literary Yoruba

• 4 Writing system
  
  ○ 4.1 Attempts at modernization

• 5 Linguistic features
  
  ○ 5.1 Phonology
    
    ▪ 5.1.1 Vowels
    
    ▪ 5.1.2 Consonants
    
    ▪ 5.1.3 Tone
    
    ▪ 5.1.4 Assimilation and elision
  
  ○ 5.2 Grammar

• 6 Islam Yoruba language relations
  
  ○ 6.1 Background
  
  ○ 6.2 Some loan words

• 7 Literature
  
  ○ 7.1 Oral literature
History

The ancestor of the Yoruba speakers is, according to their oral traditions, Oduduwa. Although they share a common history, it is only since the second half of the nineteenth century that the children of Oduduwa share one name. At some stage the term Yoruba came into use, first confined to the Oyo Kingdom; the term was used among the Hausa (as it is today) but its origins are unclear. In part due to the development of a written standard, the term Yoruba was extended to include all speakers of the language.

Linguistic means — including, for example, historical-comparative linguistics, glottochronology, and dialectology — used along with both traditional (oral) historical sources and archaeological finds, have shed some light on the history of the Yorubas and their language before this point.
The North-West Yoruba dialects, for example, show more linguistic innovations. According to some, this, combined with the fact that Southeast and Central Yoruba areas generally have older settlements, suggests a later date of immigration for Northwest Yoruba.[3]

**Varieties**

The Yoruba dialect continuum itself consists of several dialects. The various Yoruba dialects in the Yorubaland of Nigeria can be classified into three major dialect areas: Northwest, Central, and Southeast.[4] Of course, clear boundaries can never be drawn and peripheral areas of dialectal regions often have some similarities to adjoining dialects.

- **North-West Yoruba** (NWY).
  - Abẹokuta, Ibadan, Ọyọ, Ogun and Lagos (Eko) areas

- **Central Yoruba** (CY)
  - Igbomina, Yağba, Ilésà, Ifẹ, Ekiti, Akurẹ, Ẹfon, and Ijébu areas.

- **South-East Yoruba** (SEY)
  - Okitipupa, Ilaje, Ondo, Ọwọ, Ikarẹ, Ṣagamu, and parts of Ijébu.

North-West Yoruba is historically a part of the Ọyọ empire. In NWY dialects, Proto-Yoruba /gh/ (the velar fricative [ɣ]) and /gw/ have merged into /w/, the upper vowels /i/ and /u/ were raised and merged with /i/ and /u/, just as their nasal counterparts, resulting in a vowel system with seven oral and three nasal vowels. Ethnographically, traditional government is based on a division of power between civil and war chiefs; lineage and descent are unilineal and agnatic.
South-East Yoruba was probably associated with the expansion of the Benin Empire after c. 1450 AD.\[^5\] In contrast to NWY, lineage and descent are largely multilineal and cognatic, and the division of titles into war and civil is unknown. Linguistically, SEY has retained the /gh/ and /gw/ contrast, while it has lowered the nasal vowels /ịn/ and /ụn/ to /ẹn/ and /ọn/, respectively. SEY has collapsed the second and third person plural pronominal forms; thus, ìn àn wá can mean either 'you (pl.) came' or 'they came' in SEY dialects, whereas NWY for example has e wá 'you (pl.) came' and wón wá 'they came', respectively. The emergence of a plural of respect may have prevented coalescence of the two in NWY dialects.

Central Yoruba forms a transitional area in that the lexicon has much in common with NWY, whereas it shares many ethnographical features with SEY. Its vowel system is the least innovating (most stable) of the three dialect groups, having retained nine oral-vowel contrasts and six or seven nasal vowels, and an extensive vowel harmony system.

**Literary Yoruba**

Literary Yoruba, also known as *Standard Yoruba*, *Yoruba koiné*, and *common Yoruba*, is a separate member of the dialect cluster. It is the written form of the language, the standard variety learnt at school and that spoken by newsreaders on the radio. Standard Yoruba has its origin in the 1850s, when Samuel A. Crowther, the first African Bishop, published a Yoruba grammar and started his translation of the Bible. Though for a large part based on the Ṭọọ and Ibadan dialects, Standard Yoruba incorporates several features from other dialects.\[^6\] It also has some features peculiar to itself, for example the simplified vowel harmony system, as well as foreign structures, such as calques from English which originated in early translations of religious works.
Because the use of Standard Yoruba did not result from some deliberate linguistic policy, much controversy exists as to what constitutes 'genuine Yoruba', with some writers holding the opinion that the Òyọ dialect is the most "pure" form, and others stating that there is no such thing as genuine Yoruba at all. Standard Yoruba, the variety learnt at school and used in the media, has nonetheless been a powerful consolidating factor in the emergence of a common Yoruba identity.

**Writing system**

In the 17th century Yoruba was written in the Ajami script, a form of Arabic. Modern Yoruba orthography originated in the early work of CMS missionaries working among the Aku (Yoruba) of Freetown. One of their informants was Crowther, who later would proceed to work on his native language himself. In early grammar primers and translations of portions of the English Bible, Crowther used the Latin alphabet largely without tone markings. The only diacritic used was a dot below certain vowels to signify their open variants \([\varepsilon]\) and \([\varnothing]\), viz. \(\langle\varepsilon\rangle\) and \(\langle\varnothing\rangle\). Over the years the orthography was revised to represent tone among other things. In 1875 the Church Missionary Society (CMS) organised a conference on Yoruba Orthography; the standard devised there was the basis for the orthography of the steady flow of religious and educational literature over the next seventy years.

The current Yoruba alphabet used in Nigeria derives from a 1966 report of the Yoruba Orthography Committee, along with Ayọ Bamgboše's 1965 *Yoruba Orthography*, a study of the earlier Latin alphabets and an attempt to bring Yoruba orthography in line with actual speech as much as possible. Largely similar to the older alphabet, it employs the digraph \(\langle gb\rangle\) and certain diacritics, including the traditional vertical line set under the letters \(\langle\phi\rangle\), \(\langle\theta\rangle\), and \(\langle\varsigma\rangle\). In many
publications the line is replaced by a dot ⟨e⟩, ⟨o⟩, ⟨ṣ⟩. The vertical line had been proposed to avoid the diacritic being obscured by an underline.

**Nigerian alphabet**

| A | B | D | E | Ẹ | F | G | Gb | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | Ọ | P | R | S | Ṣ | T | U | W | Y |
| a | b | d | e | ẹ | f | g | gb | h | i | j | k | l | m | n | o | ọ | p | r | s | Ṣ | t | u | w | y |

The Latin letters ⟨c⟩, ⟨q⟩, ⟨v⟩, ⟨x⟩, ⟨z⟩ are not used.

The pronunciation of the letters without diacritics corresponds more or less to their International Phonetic Alphabet equivalents, except for the labial-velar stops [ḳp̣] (written ⟨p⟩) and [ɡ ɬb] (written ⟨gb⟩), in which both consonants are pronounced simultaneously rather than sequentially. The diacritic underneath vowels indicates an open vowel, pronounced with the root of the tongue retracted (so ⟨ẹ⟩ is pronounced [ɛ] and ⟨ọ⟩ is [ɔ]). ⟨ṣ⟩ represents a postalveolar consonant [ʃ] like the English ⟨sh⟩, ⟨y⟩ represents a palatal approximant like English ⟨y⟩, and ⟨j⟩ a voiced palatal plosive, as is common in many African orthographies.

In addition to the vertical bars, three further diacritics are used on vowels and syllabic nasal consonants to indicate the language's tones: an acute accent ⟨´⟩ for the high tone, a grave accent ⟨„⟩ for the low tone, and an optional macron ⟨˘⟩ for the middle tone. These are used in addition to the line in ⟨ẹ⟩ and ⟨ọ⟩. When more than one tone is used in one syllable, the vowel can either be written once for each tone (for example, *⟨ọọ⟩ for a vowel [o] with tone rising from low to high) or, more rarely in current usage, combined into a single accent. In this case, a caron ⟨ˇ⟩ is used for the rising tone (so the previous example would be written ⟨đ⟩) and a circumflex ⟨ˆ⟩ for a the falling tone.
List of characters used in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ä</th>
<th>À</th>
<th>Á</th>
<th>Â</th>
<th>É</th>
<th>È</th>
<th>É</th>
<th>Ê</th>
<th>Ô</th>
<th>Õ</th>
<th>Ò</th>
<th>Ó</th>
<th>Ÿ</th>
<th>Ñ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>ñ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Benin, Yoruba uses a different orthography. The Yoruba alphabet was standardized along with other Benin languages in the National Languages Alphabet by the National Language Commission in 1975, and revised in 1980 by the National Center for Applied Linguistics.

Benin alphabet

A B D E E F G Gb H I J K KP L M N O O P R S Sht T U W Y

Attempts at modernization

The advent of the use of writing instruments and the European cultural invasion have highlighted key issues in writing for the Yoruba language.

Firstly, Crowther and others used a diacritical marking system to denote the tonalism that is prevalent in Yoruba language. Linguists and software developers have not done enough to transfer these marks into the modern age. Unfortunately, the software widely used in websites, computers, mobile phones and tablets tend not to enable the bottom marks AND the top marks together. In the age of typewriters, editors could go over an article and hand-write the marks before additional copies are published. It is cumbersome or impossible to do this sort of editing with modern electronic systems.
Secondly, the English language is in wide use among the Yoruba, and has brought a range of new alphabetical characters (c, q, x, v and z) into the Yoruba mind-space. Many of these are in words in scientific context and do not have Yoruba direct translations. For example, chemical names like xanthium and calcium, or biological terms such as zygote and virus, or physics concepts such as quantum, cyclone and revolver. Other terms are more mundane such as cake, car, saxophone, video, zoo, quack, and computer.

Thirdly, a whole range of new characters have evolved internationally and been adopted by the Yoruba. These include currency symbols such as the Nigerian Naira (₦) and the Ghana Cedi (Ȼ); abbreviations for copyright (c), registered (r) and trademark (TM), and the web-centric @.

The Yoruba thinker, Remi-NIyi Alaran [8] has proposed an adaptation of the Crowther marking system. The Alaran method involves putting 'both' diacritical marks above the character. Benefits of this method include clearer underlining, less visual clutter, and improved ease of Yoruba language localisation:

À à A a Á á B b D ð ð E e É é É õ õ F f G g GB gb H h ì î I i Í í J j K k L l M m N n Ò ò Ó ó Ô ô Õ õ Õ õ Ò ò P p R r S s S s T t Ù ù U u Ú ú W w Y y Ñ ñ C c Q q V v X x Z z © @

**Linguistic features**

**Phonology**

The three possible syllable structures of Yoruba are consonant+vowel (CV), vowel alone (V), and syllabic nasal (N). Every syllable bears one of the three tones: high (◌), mid (◌), and low (◌).
left unmarked), and low ⟨̣⟩. The sentence 'ǹ ọ lọ' I didn't go provides examples of the three syllable types:

- ǹ — [ŋ] — I
- ọ — [ó] — not (negation)
- lọ — [lɔ] — to go

Vowels

Standard Yoruba has seven oral and five nasal vowels. There are no diphthongs in Yoruba; sequences of vowels are pronounced as separate syllables. Dialects differ in the number of vowels they have; see above.

Yoruba vowel diagram. Oral vowels are marked by black dots, while the coloured regions indicate the ranges in possible quality of the nasal vowels.

Oral vowels Nasal vowels

Front Back Front Back
The status of a fifth nasal vowel, [ã], is controversial. Although the sound does occur in speech, several authors have argued it to be not phonemically contrastive; often, it is in free variation with [ɔ]. Orthographically, nasal vowels are normally represented by an oral vowel symbol followed by ⟨n⟩ (i.e., ⟨in⟩, ⟨un⟩, ⟨en⟩, ⟨on⟩), except in case of the [n] allophone of /l/ (see below) preceding a nasal vowel, i.e. inú 'inside, belly' is actually pronounced [ǐnũ].

Consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labial</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Postalveolar/</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Palatal</td>
<td>plain</td>
<td>labial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n ~ ñ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plosive</td>
<td>b t d</td>
<td>ñ</td>
<td>k g</td>
<td>k̟ p g b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td>f s</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximant</td>
<td>l ~ n</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhotic</td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The voiceless plosives /t/ and /k/ are slightly aspirated; in some Yoruba varieties, /t/ and /d/ are more dental. The rhotic consonant is realized as a flap [ɾ], or in some varieties (notably Lagos Yoruba) as the alveolar approximant [ɹ]. Like many other languages of the region, Yoruba has
the labial-velar stops /kʼp/ and /ɡ ʼb/, e.g. pápá [kɒkɒ] 'field', gbọgbọ [ɡ ʼbɔ ɡ ʼbɔ] 'all'.

Notably, it lacks the common voiceless bilabial plosive /p/, which is why /kʼp/ is written as ⟨p⟩. It also lacks a phoneme /n/; though the letter ⟨n⟩ is used for the sound in the orthography, it strictly speaking refers to an allophone of /l/ which immediately precedes a nasal vowel.

There is also a syllabic nasal which forms a syllable nucleus by itself. When it precedes a vowel it is a velar nasal [ŋ], e.g. n ọ lọ [ŋ ọ lɔ] 'I didn't go'. In other cases its place of articulation is homorganic with the following consonant, for example ó ń lọ [ó ń lɔ] 'he is going', ó ń fọ [ó ń fɔ] 'he is jumping'.

Tone

Yoruba is a tonal language with three level tones: high, low, and mid (the default tone.\(^{[12]}\) Every syllable must have at least one tone; a syllable containing a long vowel can have two tones. Contour tones (i.e. rising or falling tone melodies) are usually analysed as separate tones occurring on adjacent tone bearing units (morae) and thus have no phonemic status.\(^{[13]}\) Tones are marked by use of the acute accent for high tone ((á), (ň)), the grave accent for low tone ((à), (ń)); Mid is unmarked, except on syllabic nasals where it is indicated using a macron ((a), (ń)); see below). Examples:

- **H**: ó bẹ 'he jumped'; síbí 'spoon'
- **M**: ó bẹ 'he is forward'; ara 'body'
- **L**: ó bẹ 'he asks for pardon'; ọkọ 'spear'.

Assimilation and elision
When a word precedes another word beginning with a vowel, assimilation or deletion ('elision') of one of the vowels often takes place. In fact, since syllables in Yoruba normally end in a vowel, and most nouns start with one, this is a very common phenomenon, and indeed only is absent in very slow, unnatural speech. The orthography here follows speech in that word divisions are normally not indicated in words that are contracted as a result of assimilation or elision: ra eja → reja 'buy fish'. Sometimes however, authors may choose to use an inverted comma to indicate an elided vowel as in ní ilé → n’ilé 'in the house'.

Long vowels within words usually signal that a consonant has been elided word-internally. In such cases, the tone of the elided vowel is retained, e.g. àdirò → ààrò 'hearth'; koríko → koóko 'grass'; òtító → óótó 'truth'.

**Grammar**

This section requires expansion. *(June 2008)*

Yoruba is a highly isolating language, with an index of synthesis of 1.09. Its basic constituent order is subject–verb–object (SVO), as in ó nà Adé 'he beat Adé'. The bare verb stem denotes a completed action (often called perfect); tense and aspect are marked by preverbal particles such as ní 'imperfect/present continuous', tí 'past'. Negation is expressed by a preverbal particle kò. Serial verb constructions are common, as in many other languages of West Africa.

Although Yoruba has no grammatical gender, it does have a distinction between human and non-human nouns; probably a remainder of the noun class system of proto-Niger–Congo, the distinction is only apparent in the fact that the two groups require different interrogative particles: tani for human nouns ('who?') and kini for non-human nouns ('what?'). The associative construction (covering possessive/genitive and related notions) consists of
juxtaposing nouns in the order modified-modifier as in *inú àpótí* {inside box} 'the inside of the box', *filà Ákàndé* 'Akande’s cap' or *àpótí aṣ* 'box for clothes' (Bamgbose 1966:110, Rowlands 1969:45-6). More than two nouns can be juxtaposed: *rèlìweè abé ilè* (railway under ground) ‘underground railway’, *inú àpótí aṣ* 'the inside of the clothes box'. In the rare case where this results in two possible readings, disambiguation is left to the context. Plural nouns are indicated by a plural word.[16]

There are two ‘prepositions’: *ní* ‘on, at, in’ and *sí* ‘onto, towards’. The former indicates location and absence of movement, the latter encodes location/direction with movement (Sachnine 1997:19). Position and direction are expressed by these prepositions in combination with spatial relational nouns like *orí* ‘top’, *apá* ‘side’, *inú* ‘inside’, *etí* ‘edge’, *abé* ‘under’, *ilè* ‘down’, etc. Many of these spatial relational terms are historically related to body-part terms.

**Islam Yoruba language relations**

**Background**

In his works such as *Islam in Africa - West African in Particular, and Missionary and Colonization in Africa*,[18] Sheikh Dr. Abu-Abdullah Adelabu used assertions like these to argue that Islam had reached Sub-Saharan Africa, including the Yoruba Lands in West Africa, as early as the first century of Hijrah through Muslim traders and expeditions during the reign of the Arab conqueror, Uqba ibn al Nafia (622–683) whose Islamic conquests under the Umayyad dynasty, in Amir Muavia and Yazid periods, spread all Northern Africa or the Maghrib Al-Arabi, including present-day Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco.
The wide adoption of imported religions and civilizations such as Islam and Christianity has managed to lay impacts both on written and spoken Yoruba. In his Arabic-English Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Quran and Sunnah, the Nigerian Muslim academic Sheikh Dr. Adelabu argued Islam has enriched African languages by providing them with technical and cultural augmentations with Ki-Swahili and Af-Somaali in East Africa and Turanci Hausa and Fula-Nyami in West Africa the most beneficiaries. Sheikh Adelabu, a Ph D graduate from Damascus cited - among many other common usages - the following words to be Yoruba's derivatives of Arabic vocabularies:[19]

**Some loan words**

- Alaafia i.e. Good, Fine Or Health(y) from derivative Al-Aafiah (Ar. تيففاعة)
- Sanma i.e. heaven or sky adopted for Samaا’ (Ar. ساملاا)
- Alubarika i.e. blessing used as Al-Barakah (Ar. قلدرلا)
- Wakati i.e. hour or time formed from Waqt (Ar. شوو)
- Alubosa i.e. onion as Al-Basal (Ar. لصبلاا)
- Adua or Adura i.e. prayer or supplication from Ad-du'a (Ar. داعلا)
- Asiri i.e. Secret or Hidden derivative of As-Sirr (Ar. السر)
- Esen i.e. Horse derivative of Hasan (Ar. ناصح)

Meanwhile, among commonly Arabic words used in Yoruba Language are names of the days such as Atalata (Ar. Ath-Thulatha ءاثثلثلا) for Tuesday, Alaruba (Ar. Al-Arbi'a ءاعبرألا) for Wednesday, Alamisi (Ar. Al-Khamis سيمخلا) for Thursday, and Jimoh (Ar. Al-Jum'ah ءعمجلا)
for Friday. By far Ojo Jimoh is the most favourably used. It's usually preferred to the unpleasant word for Friday, Eti, which means failure, laziness or abandonment.\[20\]

**Literature**

Yoruba literature

Yoruba has an extensive body of literature.

[edit] Oral literature

This section requires expansion. *(June 2008)*

- Odu Ifa
- Oriki

**Written literature**

This section requires expansion. *(June 2008)*

- Wande Abimbola
- Fayemi Fatunde Fakayode, Aare Agbefaga of Yorubaland
- Adebisi Aromolaran, king of Ijesaland
- Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa
- Adebayo Faleti
- Akinwunmi Isola
- Obo Aba Hisanjani
- Duro Ladipo
- J.F. Odunjo
- Afolabi Olabimtan
- Sobowole Sowande
- Wole Soyinka, winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature
- Amos Tutuola