

THE PATTERN OF YORUBA HISTORY

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THE history of the indigenous peoples of West Africa is ripe for intensive research. The inevitable starting point is their traditional accounts; for since they were non-literate until comparatively recent times, their historian cannot expect to base his work on the normal raw materials of written documents. Happily, the research has begun, and the purpose of this short article is to summarize what a preliminary study of the traditional accounts of one of the peoples of West Africa has revealed of their history.

The Yoruba are one of the leading peoples of West Africa. They number over 4 million in the Western Region of Nigeria; the remainder inhabit a small part of Northern Nigeria and overflow into French Dahomey and Togo, where they are known as 'Nagot' or 'Anago'. The Itsekiri of Western Nigeria are an offshoot of the main Yoruba stock, and the Oba of Benin and his immediate nobility can trace their descent from Ile-Ife, the Yoruba Holy City. Younger members of the Benin ruling house carried 'Yoruba' influence eastwards across the Niger as far as Onitsha and into the Creeks, notably to Nembe in the Brass District. Yoruba descendants are also found at Freetown, Sierra Leone, where they are known as the 'Aku' people. Outside West Africa, they are known as the 'Lucumi' in Brazil.

While concentrating on the Yoruba in Nigeria, what is said of them is essentially true of the other Yoruba-speaking peoples. They had a common origin; they might even have had an earlier common name which has been lost. They possess certain characteristics in common: they are farmers who dwell in towns; their political institutions are monarchical and yet democratic; their indigenous religion is polytheistic, but they recognize a supreme deity, the *Olorun*; they are an artistic people whose skill was once of a very high order. The fact that the Yoruba possess a homogeneous culture is noticeable throughout the areas which they inhabit or into which their influence has penetrated.

The Yoruba are not indigenous to Nigeria; they were immigrants from a region where they came under the influences of ancient Egyptians, Etruscans and Jews. Their original home

must have been in the Near East, and it is probable that the all-Black Kingdom of Meroe in the Sudan played an important part in transmitting Egyptian influences to them. Whether it was in Upper Egypt or the Yemen, the Yoruba came under Arab influences in their old homes, and their subsequent migration was connected with Arab movements. The migrations, which occurred in waves, formed parts of well-known migrations in the Sudan, through which the culture and civilization of North Africa were diffused throughout the regions immediately to the South. The first major wave, part of the great migration of Meroitic peoples, led by Kisra, a magician King, took place in the 7th century A.D. When it arrived in the area which is now Northern Nigeria, the Yoruba wave passed through the confluence of the Niger and the Benue and left a Yoruba settlement round Idah. These Yoruba immigrants subsequently became known as the Igara. The major wave swept on into part of the area now known as Yoruba-land, and the wanderers established themselves in the Ekiti country among their thinly spread predecessors, who were probably Efa or Egun peoples. From Ekiti, a minor wave went southwards and gave rise to the Idoko branch of the Yoruba.

In this first wave of migrations, the Yoruba brought with them all their characteristic institutions. The band of wanderers led by bold hunters soon founded towns, their political centres, whilst the people farmed in nearby areas. Each small town had an *Oba* or sacred chief at its head who was assisted by several secret societies, such as the *Ogboni*, in the exercise of rudimentary political and civic powers. Numerous sacred chiefs and small independent political units resulted in the Ekiti country and elsewhere. The Kisra migration was largely a peaceful penetration, as witnessed by the various relics which it left behind in places such as Karissen, Wukari and Bussa. With the enterprising farmers in search of better land who followed the great King, came also artists and artisans, who probably brought with them the prototypes of some of the well-known Yoruba terracottas and bronze heads. This first wave resulted in the planting of Yoruba elements, which not only helped to prepare the way effectively for the larger influx of the next major wave, but contributed much to the whole stream of Yoruba culture.

The second wave, the *Oduduwa* migration, is the best known in tradition. It arose from the pressure which the incursion of the Arabs into the Sudan exercised upon remnants of the

Yoruba and must have taken place towards the end of the 10th century A.D. The people who resisted all-conquering Islam found a great leader in Oduduwa (a leader later deified in tradition) and left their homes in search of a place where they could practise their traditional religion in safety. From the large chiefdoms which they later founded, it is evident that the leaders of this migration brought with them greater political ideas and experience than the earlier ones.

We may safely assume that the Oduduwa migration entered the area of modern Nigeria in the neighbourhood of Nupe. After crossing the Niger, it went southwards and eventually found a suitable site for a settlement at Ile-Ife, overwhelming the earlier inhabitants by its superior numbers and readily absorbing them. The newcomers, virile and united under one leadership, soon developed a stronghold at Ile-Ife, which became their cultural and artistic centre. Ife terra-cotta and bronze heads, distinguished by their unusual naturalism, testify to the high order of their artistic sensibilities. They also established their traditional religion with its 401 gods at Ile-Ife, which became a Holy City and was gradually idealized by them into the centre of creation. The gods they worshipped were either deified rulers such as Oduduwa or Obalufon; or gods of fertility (Orisa Oko); of divination (Ifa); of the sea and rivers (Olokun, Oshun); or of prosperity and well-being (Aje Shaluga). All these gods were but intermediaries to the supreme god, the Olorun (owner of the sky).

When the Yoruba had consolidated their political powers at Ile-Ife, they penetrated the neighbourhood in fan-like directions. This subsidiary penetration occurred in two phases. The first phase was relatively peaceful and is known euphemistically in tradition as the division of the Kingdom among Oduduwa's sons. Minor waves of migration from Ile-Ife resulted in large and small chiefdoms such as Ketu and Shabe in the far west, Oyo in the Savannah, and Benin to the east. This phase occurred chiefly in the 11th century, when the Yoruba brought into play their political genius and organizing ability; for large chiefdoms were based upon large towns, which presented problems of law and order, of farming and of trade. During this phase also, the sub-tribes such as the Ijesha, the Oyo-Yoruba, the Ijebu, the Egba became differentiated.

The second phase was that of penetration by conquest. Gradually, two powerful kingdoms arose in the Yoruba country,

and each became imperial. Oyo, to the West, achieved greatness under two warrior rulers—Oranyan and Shango—and exercised suzerainty over a wide area. At the height of Oyo's power in the 17th and 18th centuries, Dahomey paid annual tribute to it, and Yoruba influence probably extended as far as the Ga of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) as well. The ruler of the 'empire' was the *Alafin* (owner of the palace), and he established at Old Oyo, the capital, a truly elaborate court complete with eunuch and seraglio. The empire was divided into provinces, each of which embraced several chiefdoms. Metropolitan control was exercised through *Ilari* or intendants sent from Old Oyo, and sometimes through an *Ajele* or pro-consul, who represented the *Alafin* at the headquarters of provincial kings. At the capital itself, the *Alafin* was assisted by the *Oyomisi* (the nobility), led by the *Bashorun* and the *Esho Esho* (or war lords), who were led in turn by the *Are-ona Kakanfo*, the commander-in-chief.

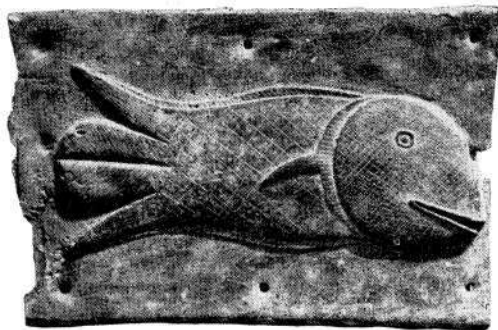
The second imperial chiefdom, which lay to the east of Ife, was Benin. It took two penetrations to establish the Yoruba dynasty firmly among the Edo people. The resulting kingdom rapidly extended its sway over an 'empire' stretching across the Niger and then recoiled westwards to include some Yoruba states. The Portuguese established contact with Benin in the 15th century, and the kingdom became famous for its bronze works (a derivative form of the Ife heads) and the mightiness of its rulers.

Space does not permit a more detailed account of either the Oyo or the Benin empire, nor of the other Yoruba states including the kingdom of the Olu of the Itsekiri. By the 19th century, both empires were in decay, and the Yoruba country was in the grip of internecine war. The ravages of the transatlantic slave trade aggravated the disruptive influences, and the result was that the Yoruba were weak, divided and demoralized when British penetration of their country began in earnest. Nevertheless, they once held their own as a transmitter of culture and civilization. The artistic side of that culture is now receiving recognition in the acknowledgement of the excellence of Ife terra-cotta and Benin bronzes. Dependent status in the modern world has, however, obscured the political and economic aspects of their earlier achievements.

Law and order was maintained throughout the Oyo empire, and, even when it was on the wane in the 19th century, the

British explorers, Captain Clapperton and Richard Lander, were able to travel in safety from Badagry on the coast to Old Oyo in the interior under the protection of the Alafin. Human sacrifice had been abolished at Old Oyo by the beginning of the 19th century, and elsewhere in the Yoruba country it was a dying custom only rarely resorted to in times of dire necessity. At Old Oyo there was neither the blood-bath of customs that marred the military kingdoms of Dahomey and Ashanti, nor the excessive cruelty which characterized some of the other African 'empires'. In the Oyo domains trade flourished; Kola nuts were taken along the caravan routes from Badagry and were exchanged for glassware and beads in North Africa by traders who passed in safety through the imperial city of Old Oyo. Throughout the Yoruba country, cotton was grown and woven into cloths of varying excellence and worn by the people according to their means. Among the Yoruba 'manner maketh man'; culture was reflected in politeness; and urbanization bred consideration for others and their points of view.

This brief analysis of the traditional account of the history of the Yoruba has revealed not only the roots, but also the depth, of their culture. It has shown that the peoples of West Africa, despite the present dependent status from which they are rapidly emerging, have a past at once fascinating to the historian and rewarding in its enrichment of our understanding of the world and its peoples. The challenge is one of techniques, and several historians and archaeologists have taken it up in the various research schemes now under way in West Africa.



Bronze Plaque excavated at Benin