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Stories of Migration and State Formation in Yorubaland: A Re-assessment of Yoruba Myth and Legend of Creation

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Abstract

There are different schools of thought about the origin of the Yoruba people but all relate to the same ancestor 'Oduduwa'. One story goes that he migrated from Mecca because of his belief in deities and came to settle in Ile-Ife and start a dynasty, which was further expanded by his sons. Another school of thought believes that he was an ordinary Yoruba man who came to power by overthrowing the existing ruling class while other stories tells us hat he descended from heaven and landed at Ile-Ife with a handful of sand and a cock in his hands, he spread the sand over the earth, which was covered with water, and the cock spread the sand all over the earth and created land. Most of these uncoordinated conflicting stories are very difficult to prove. Despite efforts by scholars of Yoruba tradition to produce facts with absolute certainty and accurate analysis of the origin of the Yoruba, little had been discovered. Since history should not depend only on myths and legends as determinants but on reality; using historical analytical methodology, this paper plunges into variances of stories of origin and state formation in Yorubaland so as to give new interpretations to themes treated previously from mythological perspectives in order to arrive at new conclusions.

Keywords: Migration, State formation, Yorubaland, Myth, Legend, Creation

Introduction

Yoruba, a generic word, with a variety of meanings, has been used to describe people, the Yoruba; their land, the Yorubaland; their culture, the Yoruba culture; and their language, the Yoruba language. Referring to people, Yoruba means the people living in South-western Nigeria, people of different pre-colonial nation-states or political groupings but with common language, customs, traditions, etc. that are mutually comprehensible in spite of differences in dialects and other socio-cultural characteristics. These people, the land they occupy, their culture and innateness are all describe, at the latest in the nineteenth century, as Yoruba. Notwithstanding the eclectic nature of the term, this study conceptualises Yoruba in the sense of people, a language, a culture, and a land.

The territory now inhabited by the Yoruba people is bordered in the west by Dahomi, on the south-west by Porto Novo and Apapa, on the south by the sea, on the east by Benin, and is faced on the north by the Mohammedan tribes from the interior, who have within recent times conquered and annexed the Yoruba province of Ilorin.¹ Although little is known about the earliest people who lived in the area of West Africa that became Nigeria, however, it would seem that the time of emergence of the Yoruba could be placed in the late Stone Age in West Africa history.² Some archeological remains of human activity there date as far back as 12,000 BC.³ The recovery and interpretation of artifacts produce vita information on the early history and culture of the Yoruba people and these excavations reveal tools made out of stone. These tools prove that they were hunters and gatherers, who eventually made the transition to agricultural subsistence.⁴

Oral traditions shrouded in myths are numerous and widely diverse in contents. They provide limited information, especially when dealing with the remote past. Like other cultures of the world, Yoruba societies deal with issues of how human came into existence. To this end, they narrate traditions that support creation and place human

¹ Ellis 1894: p. 29.

² Fadipe 1991: p. 31.

³ Cannah 1993: p. 113.

⁴ Shaw 1976: p. 61.

beings as central figures among all other creatures. Their historical consciousness started at Ile-Ife which is regarded as Yoruba common point of origin and centre of political gravity.⁵ There exist basically three accounts of origin of the Yoruba. The first is the creation myth which throws Ile-Ife up as the centre of creation of the universe, thus attracting the expression; *Ife o'ndaye, ibi ojumo ti mo wa* (meaning: Ife, the point of creation where the day dawns).⁶ The other two accounts are of migratory theories. One has it that the Yoruba original home was somewhere in the north-eastern area of Africa (Egypt or Mecca) while the other places their origin in the ceaseless movement of tribes west-wards and south-wards across the continent before AD 600.

Often, one may be fascinated by the different versions of uncoordinated folk stories being told about the origin of the Yoruba. As a young Yoruba scholar, I was told Oduduwa was the first man created by God just like the Bible said Adam and Eve were the first humans God created. The Bible says Cain the only surviving child of Adam and Eve went to another city called Nod to marry his wife. The question that often bothers me is who created the wife, the wife parent or the family of the in-law if any. Where did the parent of the wife of Oduduwa come from? A major problem that this paper seeks to solve is traditions that lack historical validity and acceptability since historians deal with facts that have rational interpretation which unfortunately some of the the Yoruba traditions of origin do not provide. On the strength of this, this paper endeavors to plunge into diverse variances of stories of origin and state formation in Yorubaland by way of review of related literatures; interpretation of these myths and legends as inversions to define and affirm the status quo and suggests by way of conclusion that even though Oduduwa is always regarded as the father of the Yoruba people, the origin of the Yoruba people could be narrowed down to the Niger-Benue region where migrations took place four thousand years ago.

Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Framework

⁵ Atanda 1980: p. 1-8.

⁶ Department of History and International Studies Department 2009: p. 42.

History was conceived as the knowledge of not only the past but also of the present. Nineteen century European scholarship questioned Africa's now undisputed contribution to human progress. In the Eurocentric intellectual tradition of the period, pre-colonial Africa of which the Yoruba people are included was perceived as a 'dark continent'. The notion of an Africa of wild animals and dark jungles lingers in many scholars' minds, untutored in the truth of the African past. On the contrary, historical process in Africa, as in some other cultures of the world is a continuum which stretches from the earliest times to the present. The pre-literate Yoruba people were conscious of the historical significance of occurring and recurring events and as such, made effort to preserve their history for future generation through oral traditions as verbally communicated histories. These verbal histories took the forms of myths, legends, folk tales, poetry, festivals, proverbs and riddles, praise songs, praise names, religious as well as secular songs.

The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines myth as a story handed down from olden time, containing the early beliefs of a race. Vansina identifies myths by their subject matter and talks about them as those stories which deal with and interpret the relations between the natural and the supernatural and are concerned with all that part of religious life that lies beyond the moral order.⁷ Afigbo in turn, considers myths as having the tendency to explain historical institutions and development by appeal to non-historic factors and forces – such as stories that see the supernatural acting at times through the agency of man, at times through the agency of the lower animals and at other times even through the agency of inanimate object, as the original and continuing causes of motion in a society.⁸ Myths are presented as incidents or events that happened "in those days", so it is difficult to situate myths in a particular period, hence there is no date for the origin of myths. It is assumed that they exist in each community. Myths also help to explain the process, the whys and wherefores of certain natural events which are usually viewed or sound mysterious. Stories about the origin of a community are often regarded as myths because they appeal to the imaginative fancies of the people. Myths essentially fuse the physical with the metaphysical and the natural

⁷ Vansina 1965: p. 157.

⁸ Afigbo 1977: p. 83-84.

with the supernatural. Hence, they cannot be meaningfully subjected to the rules of logic, rationalism and empiricism.

The religious or supernatural character of myths is emphasized by Bascom, who considers that they are accepted as faith and that they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. He opined that myths are the embodiments of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and rituals.⁹ Pender-Cudlip in reply to such definitions of myths which tend to emphasize myths as “supernatural,” “religious,” “sacred,” and “theology,” reminds users that such term is differently defined in different cultures; therefore, the native and alien ideas of what is and is not supernatural are likely to be rather different.¹⁰

Overing asserts that myth owes its bad reputation to Greek philosophy, in which it was identified with a category of fictional discourse at some point around eighth century BC¹¹ when myth or mythos became understood as a form of speech opposed to reasoned discourse or logos and as such myth became defined as opposed to both truth (myth is fiction) and to the rational (myth is absurd). Earlier on, myth had possessed a more positive impression, with a capacity both to express the fundamental truths of existence and a capacity to give pleasure and to involve the emotional participation of an audience. These qualities ensured myth’s power to captivate an audience and to be effective.¹² However, the negative views of myths were all reproduced by nineteenth-century anthropology: mythos was taken to be evidence of barbarian, primitive cultures, while logos was exclusively attributed to Western civilisation. While anthropologists took primitive cultures as their object of enquiry, they studied other people’s myths – people’s fictive constructions of reality or ‘phantom realities’. Thus, like the ancient Greeks, nineteenth-century anthropologists, and their successors well into the twentieth century, continued to view mythology as fictive, full of fabulous, untrue stories about unreal gods and heroes that erroneously explained a people’s past to them. For instance,

⁹ Stevens 1978: p. 2.

¹⁰ Pender-Cudlip 1972: p. 6.

¹¹ Overing 1997: p. 1.

¹² Woolf 1998: p: 642.

anthropology acknowledged the rationality of the 'savage mind', but it did not acknowledge the truth claims embedded in the savage 'world views'. It could not, for instance, accommodate such 'primitive' ideas as the concept of rain being caused by urinating gods, within the rational Newtonian universe.

The classical demarcation between the mythical 'reality of the really made-up' of 'primitive' people and our 'real', scientifically known reality, however, has recently been questioned by anthropologists. Marshall Sahlins argued in his *Islands of History* (1985) that in Polynesian culture, the distinction between (fictitious) myth and (real) history does not hold water: myths in Polynesian culture are the key to its cosmology and its conception of history. Overing corroborated this assertion with regard to the Piaroa-tribe in Amazonia when he submits that their mythical gods are part of their narratives about their history; and their mythical time does not belong to a closed past, but rather remains omnipresent.¹³ Therefore, the main characters in myths are usually gods, deities or supernatural heroes whose stories were usually sacred stories¹⁴ and it is therefore to some measure of degree regarded as a true account of the remote and immediate past and traditions of the people which are not invented, but experienced. It is an aspect of orally transmitted tradition among various peoples of the world and form part and parcel of the history of the people.¹⁵

In addition, history and myth are close kin inasmuch as both explain how the world got to be the way it is by telling some sort of story. But our common parlance reckons myth to be false while history is, or aspires to be, true. However, what seems true to one historian will seem false to another; in other words, one historian's truth becomes another's myth, even at the moment of utterance. While one can agree that some myths have an element of the supernatural in them, it is reasonable in the African historical context to define myth as those stories about the very earliest past that explain the origin of the societies, their institutions and culture, the activities of some noteworthy

¹³ Lorenz and Amsterdam 1977: p. 43.

¹⁴ Daniel 1969: p. 41.

¹⁵ Nwankwo 2012: p. 30.

men in those societies, and their relationship with one another, in the absence of any written evidence.

Myth and legends for instance often contain useful information relating to the origin of states and communities, the evolution and development of social and political institutions, the nature of religious and economic activities and diplomatic relations between communities. In other words, legend is a traditional story often regarded as historical but unauthenticated. A legend is a semi-true story which has been passed on from person-to-person and has important meaning or symbolism for the culture in which it originates.¹⁶ Legend is set in the past but deals with heroes/heroines in a known past. The link between myth and legend is that both are set in the past but differ in nature. Unlike myth, legend has some measures of claim to a history in an unknown past. Legend refers to a story that is passed down orally from one generation to another and has its foundation in history. They are fragments of history that help to teach morals, encourage and inspire members of the community. They are close to life and some of them are authentic. They tell stories of people who actually lived and the things that happened. However, most of them are embellished to enhance the aesthetic perspectives of the stories and make them more fascinating, and entertaining.¹⁷ Legends present personalities and events that are believed to have existed in the history of a particular community, whereas myth draws its subject from gods, superhuman entities and natural phenomenon. Thus, the deeds of great warriors, kings and leaders of a community are woven into legends. And as such, it has provided inspiration for the modern Nigerian novelist and short story writers.

On the strength of the above, it is therefore safe to assert that myth simply expresses and deals with a people's reality about the world, and for those educated within a Western tradition, myth is a strange place indeed to discover "truth"¹⁸ – although not for African historians as this paper shall unveil.

¹⁶ E2BN 2006: p. 1.

¹⁷ Bascom 1965: p. 3-20.

¹⁸ Schöpflin 1997: p. 19.

Variations of Yoruba Stories of Origin

In his book, *History of the Yoruba* (1950), Johnson traces the origin of the Yoruba to the 'East', sometimes understood by Muslim sources as the 'vicinity' or direction of Mecca. According to him, the Yoruba originally came from the North-Eastern area of Africa. The similarities between the cultures of the Yoruba and the Egyptians in terms of religious observances, works of arts, burial and other traditional practices are enough evidence.¹⁹ Lucas (1970) noted that many ancient Egyptian religious ideas have survived amongst the Yoruba: both ancient Egyptians and the Yoruba recognised the existence and the supremacy of a supreme deity but worshipped local deities. In both cultures, kings were regarded as divine authorities, certain animals as sacred and certain forms of festivals which involve dancing and singing were practiced. Magic and the use of amulets were important in the daily lives and in the afterlife beliefs of both cultures.²⁰ Also, the sacred animal of the Egyptian city of On (*Aunu*) survives in the word *Oni* (Crocodile), a name used as the title of one of the paramount chiefs in Yorubaland, that is, the *Oni* of Ife.²¹ In addition, the word *Orisa* (deity) is used by the Yoruba to refer to the name of a supreme deity, a deity or an idol. Lucas opined that the word *Orisa* is actually derived from the ancient Egyptian form *Horu-sa-Ast* or *Horu-se-Ast*.²² In terms of knowledge, the Yoruba pottery, glass and glaze work and metalwork bear a close resemblance to those of dynastic Egyptians.²³ Both cultures practiced polygamy in which the first wife is given a special role and regarded as more important than the other wives. Body mutilations practiced in ancient Egypt also find their way to the Yoruba people among which are circumcision, excision, piercing of ears and nose, tattooing, and shaving.²⁴ Yoruba social engagements among which are salutation, respect for elders, importance of oaths, and observance of moderation are similar to those in ancient Egypt. In addition, the Yoruba clothing of animal skins especially of leopards is a pre-dynastic and dynastic

¹⁹ Agai 2014: p. 5.

²⁰ Lucas 1970: pp. 412–413.

²¹ Lucas 1948: pp. 21–28.

²² Lucas 1970: pp. 411–412.

²³ Lucas 1970: pp. 414–416.

²⁴ Lucas 1970: p. 413.

Egyptian practice while Ife marbles in Yorubaland have been found to have similarities to Egyptian sculptures as Johnson also reiterated that about three or four of the forms of these sculptures can be seen in the Egyptian Court of the British Museum, showing at a glance that they are among kindred works of art.²⁵ Thus, it is from Egypt, after several years of journey that the Yoruba finally settled in Ile-Ife in Nigeria.²⁶ Oduduwa is believed to be the first leader that led the Yoruba to Ile-Ife and subsequently sent his sons and grandsons to found other Yoruba kingdoms. Johnson's conclusion is worth recalling that:

the Yoruba came originally from the East, there cannot be the slightest doubt as their habits, manner and customs, etc., all goes to prove.²⁷

Many traditions point to a fact that an alien group (Egyptians) emigrated to Yorubaland and mixed with the original population.²⁸ On one hand, quoting Apostle Atigbiofor Atsuliaghan, a high priest of *Umale-Okun*, and a direct descendant of *Orunmila*, Fani-Kayode claimed that the Yoruba left Egypt as a result of a big war that engulfed the whole of Egypt.²⁹ He opined that the Egyptian remnants settled in various places, two important places being Ode Isekiri and Ile-Ife. On the other hand, the Awujale of Ijebuland revealed that the Ijebu descended from ancient Nubia (a colony of Egypt).³⁰ He used the evidence of language, body, scarification and coronation rituals that are similar to Nubians to buttress that the Ijebu are descendants of the Nubians.³¹ Since the Nubians were colonized by the Egyptians, the Ijebu, and by extension, all Yoruba customs, derived from the Egyptian. Aderibigbe, an indigenous scholar, also accepts that the Yoruba people migrated from Egypt when he says:

the general trend of these theories, most of them based on Yoruba traditions, is that of a possible origin from 'the east'.³²

²⁵. Johnson 2001: pp. 6-7.

²⁶. Law 1973: pp. 207-222.

²⁷. Johnson 1921: p. 27.

²⁸. Akintoye 2010: p 32.

²⁹. Fani-Kayode 2013: p. 7.

³⁰. Olomu and Eyebira 1986: p. 24.

³¹. Lucas 1970: pp. 411-413.

³². Aderibigbe 1976: pp. 18-20.

Many traditional Yoruba have always claimed Egypt as their place of original abode, and that their monarchical tradition derives from the Egyptians. In addition, many ancient papyri discovered by archaeologists point at an Egyptian origin of the Yoruba people.³³

The Yoruba of Nigeria are also believed by many modern historians to have descended from a people who were living on the banks of the Nile 2,000 years ago, and who were at the time in close contact with the Egyptians and the Jews³⁴ sometime before AD 600. These people must have left their lands, probably because of wars, search for black slaves, gold, minerals or other sacred commodities³⁵ and have joined in the ceaseless movement of tribes west-wards and south-wards across the continent. One can only guess at the many adventures they and their descendants would have had on their long journey and at the number of generations which would have passed before they arrived.³⁶ According to the studies of philology and etymology, most of the languages in Nigeria in the Kwa group of languages have a meeting point.³⁷ The Yoruba and Idoma separated some six thousand years ago;³⁸ while the Yoruba and Igala separated about two thousand years ago;³⁹ two thousand years ago corresponds to the time that the Yoruba dialects: Ekiti, Ijebu, Oyo, Itsekiri, Ilaje, Ikale etc started having distinct dialectical identities. Linguistic studies have indicated that Yoruba in the eastern flanks of the Yoruba nation; Ekiti, Yagba, Kabba, Owo, Ijebu, Itsekiri and to some extent Ife, speak the most ancient Yoruba dialects. Glottochronological studies have also revealed that the dialects in the south-east are more ancient than those of central and western Yorubaland.

The *Oke Oramfe* version is another school of thought considered in the stories of Yoruba origin. *Oke Oramfe* is located in Ile-Ife. According to this account, Ile-Ife is not

³³ Obaro-Ikime 1980: p. 124.

³⁴ Obaro-Ikime 1980: p. 126.

³⁵ Agai 2014: p. 2.

³⁶ Eyebira and Oritseweyinmi 2010: p. 4.

³⁷ Hair 1968: p. 249.

³⁸ Bradbury 1964: p. 150.

³⁹ Bradbury 1964: p. 155.

only the cradle of the Yoruba people but also of mankind.⁴⁰ In their research article titled *Yorubaland up to 1800*, Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980) give a full picture of what *Oke Oramfe*'s version is all about. According to this legend, there was a period when the world was covered by water. The Almighty God then decided to send some of his messengers to the world and they included *Obatala* or *Orisa Nla* or *Orisa Alase* (as the leader) and sixteen *Oye* (immortals). They were given five pieces of iron, a lump of earth tied to a white piece of cloth, and a cockerel. Somewhere on their way to the world, the leader, *Obatala*, got drunk with palm wine.⁴¹ *Oduduwa* seized the symbol of authority from him and eventually led the party to the world. The site on which they landed is traditionally known as *Oke Oramfe* in *Ile-Ife*. On arrival at the site, *Oduduwa* set down the five pieces of iron and placed the lump of earth on them. The cockerel then spread its toes on the earth. Consequently, the earth was formed and *Oduduwa* became the ruler. It was from this base (*Ife*) that he extended his authorities to other Yoruba towns and villages.⁴² However, the idea of a rain and dove as the method of earth creation sounds more like magic than real, especially when enough archeological evidences have shown that the Yoruba race is not more than 2000 years, which means other tribes existed before the *Oduduwa* appearance⁴³ and moreover, contemporary historians and scholars do not believe in a single cause of an event (monocausality), thus, these variances constitute accepted schools of thought in Yoruba stories of origin and state formation.

Oduduwa Revolution: A Historical Amplification and Interpretation of the Cock, Sand and Palm Wine Mythological Perception of Yoruba Origin

The concept of creation is a universal phenomena and in his '*Myths of the World*', Michael Jordan asserts that every society has developed notions of creation process, often highly elaborate ones⁴⁴ and traditions of origin and state formation in African perspective which are preserved with myths and legends lack historical validity and

⁴⁰ Bamidele 2013: p. 6.

⁴¹ Akinjogbin and Ayandele 1980: pp. 24-25.

⁴² Akinjogbin and Ayandele 1980: p. 27.

⁴³ Sowunmi 2011: p. 3.

⁴⁴ Jordan 1993: p. 29.

acceptability as a result of their inadequate understanding and interpretations. In the light of this, it is pertinent to note at this junction that what many Yoruba scholars misinterpreted as myth and legends of creation are mere inversions, employed by the non-literate myth-making genius of the Yoruba society to define and preserve the memory of landmark events such as war, developments, innovations, civilization or the process of state formation in Yorubaland in order to allow their transmission from one generation to the other. In other words, many young Yoruba scholars have failed to distinguish Yoruba stories of origin from the process of state formation in Yorubaland.

The ninth and tenth century Ife was a great and growing economy, the richest and most dynamic place in the whole of Yorubaland.⁴⁵ Politically, the kings of each Ife settlement at a point in time, according to tradition, worked out some system of cooperation among themselves, a sort of alliance over which one of them presided as chairman.⁴⁶ The details of this arrangement are not clear but the alliance was a loose one, membership was voluntary, no central chieftaincy constitution was considered and any king could pull out at will and each settlement kept its autonomy. In some cases, such alliances collaborated in ritual matters, joint sacrifices to the gods for the common welfare of all the settlements. One Benin (a western Nigeria city-state) oral tradition states that during the reign the last *Ogiso*, his son and heir apparent Ekaladerhan was banished from Benin as a result of one of the Queens changing a message from the oracle to the *Ogiso*.⁴⁷ According to Ogunode, (a political and economic historian), all available sources agree that *Ogiso Owodo*, the father of Ekaladerhan, was a weak 'king' while Prince Ekaladerhan was a powerful warrior and well loved.⁴⁸ On leaving Benin, he travelled in a westerly direction to the land of the Yoruba and at that time, *Ifa* oracle said that the Yoruba people of Ile Ife (also known as Ife) will be ruled by a man who would come out of the forest.

⁴⁵ Oyeniyi 2012: p. 2.

⁴⁶ Ogunyemi 2010: p. 16.

⁴⁷ Smith 1988: p. 71.

⁴⁸ Interview with: Ogunode, S. A. 2014.

Following Ekaladerhan's arrival at the Yoruba city of Ile Ife, he changed his name to '*Izoduwa*', (which in his native Edo language means, '*I have chosen the path of prosperity*').⁴⁹ The name Izoduwa was corrupted into Oduduwa, also known as *Odudua* or *Oodua*.⁵⁰ Izoduwa or Oduduwa being a prince left Benin with some people who accompanied him. They finally settled on a hill beyond the immediate environs of the settlements in Ife. However, at some point in time, they moved down, staked claims to some land within the area and started to build a new settlement. From the moment the group arrived, it was unprepared to accept the claims of precedence by the older settlement; it was also not willing to have any dealing with the existing alliance of kings which at the time was headed by Obatala. This led to the beginning of conflicts between oduduwa group and some of the older settlements and it got worse over time. At a point, Oduduwa and his groups were overpowered and forced to pay tribute of sheep and fowls, yet, the group was not dislodged; it rebuilt its strength and was ready to fight again. The new conflict dragged on and eventually the parties agreed to attempt to make peace and Obatala, the king of *Ideta* and chairman of the alliance of kings was put in charge of the arrangement for general negotiations towards permanent peace. However, Obatala was incompetent and unstable (often getting drunk) and his excessive claim to authority alienated many.⁵¹

By contrast, Oduduwa's excellent qualities of leadership won the admiration of even his most tenacious enemies and some of them decamped to his side; when another conflict started, Obatala declined in strength and a major attack led to his dislodgement from *Ideta* into an area far in the wood where he established new camp and named it *Ideta-Oko* (*Ideta* in the wood).⁵² The outbreak of smallpox in *Ideta-Oko* further reduced Obatala's strength due to the loss of lives of many of his warriors until at last, a group led by a prince named Ojumu urged all for peace.⁵³ The result of the peace agreement provided for a constitution under which the new people and the older settlements would

⁴⁹ Egharebva 1968: p. 1-8.

⁵⁰ Egharebva 1968: p. 10.

⁵¹ Interview with: Ogunode, S. A. 2014.

⁵² Akintoye 2010: p. 63.

⁵³ Akintoye 2010: p. 68.

fuse together. By then, Oduduwa had become far and away the most dominant leader in Ife. Practically, all were prepared to accept him as their ruler and all looked up to him to lead Ife back to order and peace. Obatala had no choice than to concede authority to him.⁵⁴ A festival is held annually in Ife to celebrate and remember the conflicts of Oduduwa with the natives and Obatala worshipers during this festival mark their bodies with white dots to remember the small pox at *Ideta-Oko* and on the eleventh day of the festival, there is joyful celebration of the peace agreement which ended the wars. He was designated the father of the Yoruba nation because of his ability to conceive and create a more inclusive society using the old system of monarchy to serve a larger agglomeration of people, a wider polity, thereby making the Yoruba the most urbanized group of people in the tropical African forests. Iron existed before Oduduwa⁵⁵ but it was during his time in Ife that the popular name of the god of Iron (*Alaka-Aiye*) was changed to Ogun – the name of an Ife king while wealth and sea had long existed but they were combined as one and given the name *Olokun* (for wealth of riches). Even the most senior Yoruba god, *Orisa Nla* became Obatala (Oduduwa's rival) and so known to all of Yorubaland.

The Oduduwa revolution led to the concentration and increase in population of Ile-Ife due to civilization and development of trade. He created single system of government,⁵⁶ provided new homes for settlement of groups, established outposts and toll gates to protect the trade routes into and out of Ife at Ipetumodu, Ita Ijero and Apomu to mention but a few etc. For all Yoruba people after Oduduwa, Ife was the home of the progenitor of Yoruba race and home of virtually pan-Yoruba gods. Ife not only grew and prospered but also served as inspiration for major political changes in Yorubaland. Kingdoms like that of Ife sprang up in most parts of the Yoruba forest, all of them acknowledge Ife's leadership; their rulers claiming Ife as the source of their origin and legitimacy,⁵⁷ thus attracting the expression: *Ife o'ndaye, ibi ojumo ti mo wa* (meaning Ife, the point of creation where civilization originates).

⁵⁴ *Dynamic Africa*: 2012.

⁵⁵ Willet 1968: p. 73.

⁵⁶ Akinjogbin 1980: p. 102.

⁵⁷ Falola and Michel 1989: pp. 301-329.

For the great part that Oduduwa played as king of Ife, the collected imagination of the masses represented him as larger than life. Long before then, there had existed the myth about *Olodumare* sending some heavenly beings to come and establish life on earth.⁵⁸ That basic story could no longer hold water as Oduduwa had to be part of it. Indeed, he had to be the leader of the heavenly beings that came from heaven to earth with a chain. Over the next century, the myth-making genius of the Yoruba nation amplified and embellished Oduduwa's part in the story of creation. The titanic fight between him and Obatala had to be woven into it. So in the end, the full detail of the story came to be that Obatala had first led the heavenly beings coming towards the earth, but he got drunk on the way while Oduduwa took over and completed the mission. Thus he became the first man on the earth and the progenitor of the Yoruba nation; therefore contriving the whole episode in the cock and a sack of cloth containing sand, iron, and palm wine myth.

Many traditions of origin, especially preserved in the framework of a dynastic kingdom, are in a sense elitist in their preoccupation with kings and wars. They sometimes shed light, almost incidentally on an economic base which is vividly depicted in eye-witness account from a later date. It is often far from clear whether they reflect real historical individuals or are personifications of phases of historical experiences. Therefore, the various legends do not fit together to make a tidy whole while historians differ radically in the way they interpret them. Oduduwa's innovations eventually became the basis for identifying the direct descendants of Oduduwa and also for legitimising political authority or kingship in Yorubaland, both in the past and in the present. However, the revolution associated with the arrival of Oduduwa did not obliterate the existence of the autochthonous group or their traditions. Obviously, the impression which the Yoruba elite wanted to create and foster in the contemporary period is that the Yoruba nation is a united and indivisible group, notwithstanding the glaring differences between the various Yoruba sub-groups and their perception of one another. Besides, the manner in

⁵⁸ David 1991: pp. 31-32.

which the elite went about it polarised Yorubaland. It is therefore not surprising that achieving unity in Yorubaland has become onerous.

Putting Yoruba Origin Mystery to Rest: Niger/Benue Confluence Breakthrough

The central philosophy is that creation was carried out by a superior unseen power that created a fundamentally moral universe. However, none of the traditions has explanations for the systematic process of evolution and tool making that is provided in archaeology. To scientists and archaeologists therefore, these traditions do not provide adequate explanations for the origin of the early people. Thus, the story of origin must be replaced with something that was in accordance with our general knowledge.

Following a series of investigations and interviews, the origin of the Yoruba people could be traced down to the Niger/Benue confluence. This attribution of Yoruba origin to the Niger/Benue area is based on linguistic breakthrough. It has thus been discovered that all the speakers of the *Kwa* sub-family of language such as Ijo, Edo, Yoruba, Idoma, Nupe, Igala and so on, dispersed from the general area of the Niger/Benue confluence region.⁵⁹ Deeply differentiated, they clearly reflect millennia of historical continuity as linguistic intrusions are clearly related to specific historical migrations. It has been discovered that the speakers initially lived in this Niger/Benue area before they dispersed. The antiquity of yam cultivation as well as the importance of yam in the southwestern Nigerian culture further helped solidify this argument. As Adeoye noted:

Yoruba as a language, is complex and multi-dimensional. It is not given to easy understanding, as most Yoruba words have more than one meaning.⁶⁰

In addition to this, the language has more than hundred variants intercommunicable dialects.⁶¹ Linguists have therefore classed Yoruba intercommunicable dialects as belonging to similar dialect areas. According to Ogunode:

the Yoruba groups are assumed to have developed out of undifferentiated Volta–Niger populations by at least the 1st millennium

⁵⁹ Adetugbo 1982: p. 207–224.

⁶⁰ Adeoye 2005: p. 2.

⁶¹ Falola 2006: p. 29.

BC. Settlements of early Yoruba speakers are assumed to correspond to those found in the wider Niger area from about the 4th century BC especially at Ife.⁶²

This assertion is corroborated by Afe, (a legal historian) who asserts that:

rough basic vocabulary counts reveals that the Yoruba, Edo and Ibo may have started to diverge not much less than 4000 years ago near the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, and this is where the Yoruba language is presumed to have separated from related ethno-linguistic groups like Igala, Ibo, and Edo.⁶³

It could therefore be said with adequate linguistic facts that the Yoruba people were part of the *Kwa* or Niger/Benue migrants. This is further buttressed by an account of what is now Southern Nigeria, written at the beginning of the 16th century, which mentions *Geebuu* (Ijebu-Ode, a city in modern southwestern Nigeria); *Beny* (Benin City of southwestern Nigeria); *Jos* (Ijo tribe of southern Nigeria) and *Subou* (Urhobo tribe of western Nigeria).⁶⁴

The linguistic evidence and the various conclusions already drawn from them by Yoruba academic and lay historians followed precisely the above interpretations that Yoruba speaking people already inhabited southwestern Nigeria with clusters of ancient settlements before Oduduwa appeared in Ife while he only consolidated and instituted the monarchy after he subdued those he met there. Ife traditions also remember the names of such kings as *Kutukutu Oba Igbo* and *Osangangan Obamakin*, who were much older than Oduduwa.⁶⁵ Therefore, there is an increasing evidence to show that the Oduduwa tradition should be seen, not just as a myth of state formation in Yorubaland, but rather as the end of one and the beginning of another period in the political and constitutional development of the Yoruba.

It is worth noting that regional variants in myth are often politically determined. For instance, One of Oyo tradition states that the first *Ooni* (King) of Ife was a slave and it seems likely that traditions of Ife supremacy were elaborated as an ideology subversive

⁶² Interview with: Ogunode, S. A. 2014.

⁶³ Interview with: Afe, E. A. 2014.

⁶⁴ Bradbury 1964: p. 150.

⁶⁵ Isichei 1997: p. 245.

of Oyo hegemony. Oyo, apparently the largest of the Yoruba kingdoms which grew up in fourteenth century was ruled by a woman,⁶⁶ Iyayun during long regency in the late fifteenth century. It was reported that she wore the crown, puts on the royal robes and ruled the kingdom as a man.⁶⁷ Peel however suggests that they were men, described as women to exclude their heirs from the succession⁶⁸ and it is likely that these similar stories of origin and creation are really examples of a pattern we have noted previously, that is, the use of inversion to define and affirm the status quo.

Emigrations from Ife (the home of Oduduwa and the cradle of Yoruba civilisation) which might be due to different reasons during and after the Oduduwa epoch resulted in the foundation of many new kingdoms, though it is probable that some only had a change of rulers (such as Benin). The Yoruba kings and their communities, all claim an ancestor from Ife, 'the sons of Oduduwa' as majority of the most important kingdoms appears to have rulers who were either sons or grandsons of Oduduwa and every other community, including those that may or may not have a change of rulers cherished Oduduwa's legitimacy and sought for it by claiming ancestry to it. This may have this been the historical origin of *Ebi* (family) system of government which later grew into a concept of societal organization, as kingdoms founded from Ife became centers from which migrants groups went out to found other kingdoms. Moreover, some kingdoms would no doubt have been founded without any origination from Ife or any other existing kingdom by adventurous persons acting on their own strength, although benefiting from the general tradition evolving all around them.

Conclusion

As a result of the diverse socio-economic and political development brought about by Oduduwa, the people of Ife during his time wove a folktale around him and Obatala, portraying both as heavenly beings, sent to the earth to rule and build, but Obatala lost his leadership role to Oduduwa due to his excessive drinking habit. This folktale was

⁶⁶ Calvocoressi and David 1979: p. 19.

⁶⁷ Johnson 1921:p. 156.

⁶⁸ Peel 1979: p. 125-127.

thus passed on by local historians as well as the people of his era and transferred from one generation to another in form of oral tradition. Moreover, Oduduwa's successors deified him and subsequent generations transposed him all the way back to the very beginning of creation and crowned him as the first human to walk the earth, the progenitor of the Yoruba race. Until deep into the twentieth century, some of the best minds available to us in historical scholarship took up the Samuel Johnson's direction which established Oduduwa's root in the east, some distant foreign land outside of the modern day Nigeria, and brought him as a conquering foreign prince to Ife. However, there is the possibility that the said east of Yorubaland where Oduduwa came from might be Benin since technically; Benin is geographically to the east of Ife. An assertion shared by Ovbua, *Oba Edu Akenzua* who submits that the existence of this fact has been proven beyond doubt by anthropological and folkloric evidence.⁶⁹ The traditional accounts of the troubles, growth and development in Ife during Oduduwa's time were many and complicated; countless versions exist, each with its own twist, orientation and emphasis. Nevertheless, by carefully sifting through the infinite variety of traditions and versions, this basic traditional narrative was put together to supplement the existing Yoruba epistemology of Origin and state formation.

Obviously, there is a connection between the different versions of the story. The political one may be the authentic story of the founding of Ife kingdom through conquest. However, the myth of creation lends it a legitimacy that is denied by the conquest story; just as it appears that it is lent some credence by the fact that, as a result of the embarrassment it caused their deity, the worshippers of Obatala are forbidden from taking palm wine. Indeed the second version of the cosmogonic myth also appears to foreshadow the political variant. The claim that Obatala got drunk and the task of creation had to be performed by Oduduwa already has some political colouration which is now explicit in the political version of the tradition.

⁶⁹ Idubor 2010: p. 2.

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