

PRE-COLONIAL ORIGINS OF THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN NIGERIA:
THE YORUBA IDENTITY AS A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: The author tries to put in evidence the pre-colonial origins of Nigerian national questions. Based on the Yoruba identity as case study, he deals with aspects related with the importance of the State in the interior of Yoruba groups in the pre-colonial era, as well as with the territorial domination, with the survival of the identity of the Yoruba in the pre and post colonial era, and also with the emergence of a Yoruba conscience post-colonial, stimulated by the contact with the English.

INTRODUCTION

The place of the Yoruba in contemporary Nigeria, and in relation to the National Question, has been influenced by many factors. These include, among others: the manipulation of Yoruba and Nigerian history for specific ends; the promotion of a pan-Yoruba consciousness and cultural exclusiveness built on the myth of Oduduwa; the use of ethnocentric traits (e. g., common language, boundary, beliefs, group identity) for inter-ethnic competition in a plural society; the claim to early contacts with Western education and Christianity which, from the colonial period onwards, became significant criteria in access to jobs, business and politics; and arising from the preceding, a strong claim to modern civilization, more than any other group in the federation. Indeed, on the basis of the last point, some members of the Yoruba ruling class have, in both public and private discussions (more in the latter) argued that the Yoruba are better qualified than any other group in Nigeria, to provide the leadership for the entire country. Chief Obafemi Awolowo¹, acclaimed in many notable quarters as the

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(1) For a comprehensive work on Awolowo, see Sope Oyelaran, Toyin Falola M. Okoye and A. Thompson (eds). *Awolowo: The End of An Era?* (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University, 1988).

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'leader of the Yoruba', attempted a rationalization in 1947, based on the superiority of Western culture and the degree of its infiltration to the different ethnic groups in the country:

In embracing Western culture, the Yorubas take the lead, and have benefited immensely as a result. The Kfiks, the Ijaws, the Ibibios and the Ibos come next. The Hausas and Fulanis on the other hand are extremely conservative, and take reluctantly, the Western civilization ... And if the race is to be swift, in spite of their lower cultural background, the Ibos or the Ibibios would certainly qualify for self-government, long before the Hausas².

The leaders of the other groups do not share this conclusion. For instance, Chief Mnanidi Azikiwe, regarded as the "Leader of the Igbo", also articulated the belief in the superiority of his own race:

The God of Africa has especially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the ages... The martial prowess of The Ibo nation at all stages of human history has enabled them not only to conquer others but also to adopt themselves to the role of preserver... The Ibo nation cannot shirk its responsibility³

The afore mentioned factors are not exhaustive, but are all significant in strengthening the Yoruba identity within the contemporary Nigeria polity. Those factors partly contribute to the undermining of a pan-Nigerian consciousness and the emergence of a strong network of a mass-based organization. They also impact upon class relations. The dominant elite manipulates this identity, and uses it to lay claim to leadership. At the same time, this elite falls back on this

(2) Chief Obafemi Awolowo. *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, (London; Faber and Faber, 1947) p. 49.

(3) N. Asikiwe. *My Odyssey*, London, 1970, p. 243.

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same identity to forestall the underprivileged Yoruba from aligning with other ethnic groups since those 'others' have been made to acquire the attributes of enemies; rivals, competitors, and people of inferior intellect.

This essay does not explore all the important factors that influence the role of the Yoruba (in particular, its dominant class) in contemporary Nigeria. Our task is simply to analyse the pre-colonial origins of the contemporary problems of the National Question. It is, however, important to recognise that the colonial era introduced far-reaching changes which have, in several ways, laid the foundation of several of our contemporary problems⁴. This essay is not on this important epoch, but it is relevant to recognise that colonialism accentuated group differences, encouraged the formation of classes which benefitted from promoting group differences and hostilities, and introduced measures which made it difficult to achieve political integration and rapid economic development⁵.

Our emphases in this short essay are on the interactions among the politics which existed in pre-colonial Yorubaland, and the unifying factors which are now being employed to present a Yoruba identity in contemporary Nigeria. The various pre-colonial Yoruba groups maintained strong relations with one another, and the factors which promoted these contacts have now become the most appropriate tools in building a pan-Yoruba consciousness. The essay points out that the various Yoruba (and the states within them) were more dominant in the pre-colonial era than on all embracing Yorubaland, now wrongly assumed to have constituted an homogeneous and autonomous country. In the context of the contemporary National Question, it is convenient for the Yoruba ruling class to occasionally submerge the various Yoruba groups in the attempt to forge a strong Yoruba 'nation' which would be in a strong position to compete with the other equally large and viable 'nations'.

The thrust of our brief contribution highlights the following:

- a) the importance of the states within the Yoruba groups in the pre-colonial era. Inter-state or inter-group relations constituted a central issue in the pre-colonial understanding of the National Questions;

(4) These changes have been extensively discussed in Toyin Falola (ed). *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development?* (London: Zed, 1987), and Toyin Falola and S.O. Arifalo (eds). *Nigeria Under British Rule, 1900-1960*, (University of Ife Press). Forthcoming.

(5) The impact of colonialism on class is the subject of a forthcoming work: Toyin Falola and J. Ihonvbere (eds). *Class, State and Society in Nigeria*, (Heinemann, 1988).

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- b) the attempts by a few states and a few civilism and military members of the ruling class to merge states and dominate larger territories during the pre-colonial era. In other words, steps were taken to extend 'nationalities'. Both (a) and (b) do indicate that centrifugal and centripetal forces were permanently at work: boundaries were re-defined and people were forced to migrate from one area to another;
- c) that group identities have survived both the colonial and post-colonial periods; and finally,
- d) that contacts with Britain and the subsequent developments in the country's history have encouraged the Yoruba faction of the national bourgeoisie to promote a pan-Yoruba consciousness, in spit of (c).

The interests of the dominant class are explained in all the relevant aspects of our thrust.

TERRITORY. TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY AND CITIZENSHIP

Recent attempts at territorial definitions of Yorubaland have been too bold, to the extent of searching for evidence to include as many groups of people as possible in the southern and central parts of Togo, the southern part of the Republic of Benin and south-western Nigeria⁶. The evidence-cultural similarities - have only been used to add to the increasing list of Yoruba groups. But this same evidence can also be used to partition Yorubaland, especially to exclude the groups in the peripheries which have several things in common with their non-Yoruba neighbours. In other words the evidence of cultural similarities also qualify the peripheral groups to be lumped with other non-Yoruba communities with which they share several things in common, depending on the advantages

(6) One of these attempts is by I.A. Akinjogbin, "Towards A Historical Geography of Yoruba Civilization", *The Proceedings of the Conference on Yoruba Civilization*, (History Department, University of Ife, 1976).

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which such a lumping could bring to the members of the dominant elite in these places.

The problem of definition has arisen partly because of the two criteria which have been employed. The first is language: the assumption is to regard as part of Yorubaland all areas where the Yoruba language (or its dialect) is spoken. This criterion is meaningful to the extent that it is reinforced by other aspects of culture or human activities. The second is to include people and places that claim migration from Ile-Ife. This is problematic. It ignores, for instance, the obvious fact that migrations, in cases when they did occur, relate more to the dynastic groups than to a mass movement. A dynasty (ruling class) could preside over a group with a different ethnic background. A variant of this second criterion is to regard as Yoruba, people who have traditions that their rulers were descendants of Oduduwa. This is also difficult because the Oduduwa myth has been used by several states mainly to legitimize the basis of power of their dynasties.

On the basis of these criteria, the following comprise Yorubaland: areas in modern-day Lagos, Oyo, Ogun and Ondo states, the south-eastern part of Kwara state, the people of Ketu, Ana, Sabe in the Republic of Benin and the Atakpame in the Republic of Togo. All these are Yoruba, and they speak dialects of the Yoruba language. Yoruba's major neighbours include the Bio, Igbo, Ibirra and Igala to the east, the Nupe and Bariba to the north, and the Fen, Mali, Egun, and the other Bwe-speaking people to the west.

There are certainly problems in trying to include other groups. Some have attempted to include the Bio kingdom of Benin because of the dynastic link between Benin and Ife and the spread of culture between the Yoruba and Bio. For similar reasons, the Igala, southern Nupe and Boira are often called Yoruba. Those are very large claims, with very little evidence to back them up. Cultural similarity is grossly inadequate as a factor since culture could be imposed or extensively borrowed without suggesting, in the least, a change in ethnicity.

There is no space to undertake a full critique of these various delimitations some of which have been influenced by a patriotic concern to lay claim to as large a territory as possible. For the current exercise, the Yoruba in modern Nigeria occupy part of Kwara and Bendel, and dominate Lagos, Oyo, Ogun and Ondo states. Table 1 lists areas that are recognised to be inhabited by the Yoruba-speaking by the 1963 population census.

To treat the Yoruba-speaking area as a unit can only be justified on cultural and linguistic similarities. Both are now increasing in uniformity because of the current emphasis on 'a common historical experience', the emergence of a standard Yoruba dialect now widely employed in education, and increasing social and geographical mobility. However, Yorubaland was never a single socio-political unit.

TABLE 1 Nigerian administrative areas with predominantly Yoruba-speaking populations.

Administrative area	Area 1953		Population ('000s)		Major constituent Yoruba subgroups
	('000 km ²)		1962 (est.)	1963	
Oyo State	36.8	2432	3984	5209	
Ibadan Division ^a	5.8	797	1115	1259	Oyo, Ibarapa
Ife Division	2.1	217	383	515	Ife
Ilesa Division	2.5	18	321	482	Ijesa
Ogun Division ^b	6.0	853	1458	2068	Oyo, Igbolo, Igbomina
Oyo Division ^c	22.1	378	706	885	Oyo.
Ogun State	17.5	978	1437	1371	
Egba Division	5.5	394	559	630	Egba, Awori
Egbado Division	5.6	236	340	345	Egbado, Ketu, Ifonyin, Chori, Awori.
Ijebu Division	5.0	249	410	240	Ijebu
Remo Division	1.4	99	128	156	Ijebu (remo)
Ondo State	21.3	945	2188	2728	
Ekiti Division ^d	5.4	327	1004	1418	Ekiti
Okitipupa Division	4.0	150	221	276	Ikale, Ilaje
Ondo Division	6.9	243	561	536	Ondo
Owo Division ^e	4.8	225	401	497	Owo, Akoko
Lagos State	3.5	505	999	1444	
Badagry Division	0.7	66	115	122	Awori, Egu etc.
Epe Division	1.7	60	105	130	Ijebu etc.
Ikeja Division	1.1	112	329	526	
Lagos	0.07	267	450	665	Awori, Ijebu ^f
Kwara State ^g	16.4	509	905	1081	
Ilorin Division ^h	6.9	399	774	1081	Oyo, Igbolo, Igbomina, Ekiti
Kabba Division	9.5	110	131	180	Yagba, Ijumu, Ikalri, Abinu, Igbade

Sources: J.S. Eades; *The Yoruba Today* (Cambridge University Press, 1980) p. 3.

- a. Includes present Ibadan City, Ibadan and Ibarapa Divisions.
- b. Includes Osun Central, North-East, North-West and South Divisions.
- c. Includes Oyo North and Oyo South Divisions.
- d. Includes Ekiti North, South, West and Central Divisions and Akure Divisions.
- e. Includes Oyo and Akoko Divisions.
- f. These areas now include most of Metropolitan Lagos, with an extremely mixed population.
- g. Figures relate only to predominantly Yoruba-speaking areas of Kwara State, i.e. Ilorin and Kabba Divisions.
- h. Includes Ilorin, Oyo (Ofa) and Igbomina-Ekiti Divisions.

The important issues of territorial sovereignty and citizenship could be obscured by the debate on the geographical delimitations of Yorubaland and the recent development of imposing a homogeneity on the Yoruba-speaking people. What geographical labels did the pre-colonial people invent for their territories, and by what name(s) did they refer to themselves? In addition, were they conscious of such labels and names and willing to defend them in the face of threats, both internal and external, to destroy the body of ideas or meanings which the labels and names represented? To an extent, the use of broad ethnic categories (e.g., the Yoruba) may be misleading, in that we need strong evidence to show that the people were conscious of their ethnicity and national identity.

The answers to these questions reveal the emphasis on groups rather than on single 'Yoruba nation'. Groups had their territories while citizenship was defined in relation to the membership of a state within a group. Land, an aspect of territorial sovereignty, was communal, and no pan-Yoruba authority ever emerged to control all land. Territorial sovereignty and citizenship were not defined in a pan-Yoruba framework since there were different autonomous states. These states did not even evolve a loose political federation. The ruling class in the different states forget relations (as explained below) but was not one in which one of them assumed an ever-whelming control over all others. Every *oba* was sovereign in his domain, and he, together with his chiefs and lineage representatives, constituted the leading members of the political class. The exception was when an imperial control had been imposed, and the territory became a vassal to a metropole.

Several sovereign states belonging to different groups dotted Yorubaland. They generally consisted of towns surrounded by outlying rural areas. The town was like a metropolis, with a network of adjoining farmlands. Some of these states were large, like Oyo the largest in the 18th century, and Ibadan the largest in the 19th century. Some were just of medium size, like Owu which was destroyed in 1826, Ondo, Ilesa and Ife. Several were small, such as the Egba

states before the 19th century, the Ekiti states and a host of others among the Iyagba, Owe, Oworo, Dumu in the northeast, and Ilaje and Ikale in the southeast.

The claim to different autonomy and sovereignty depended partly on the nature and pattern of state formation in Yorubaland. Sources do not talk of the formation of a Yoruba nation but rather of several states and groups. Some in fact talk of pre-Oduduwa communities, that is, in reference to autochthonous communities that existed before the imposition of dynasties which had a connection with Ile-Ife or/and before a process of political centralization. State formation in Yorubaland is associated in myths with the activities of Oduduwa and his 'children'. These myths do not talk of unity among these 'children' to establish a single nation, but rather a host of nations. One inference that could be drawn from the myths is that political centralization did take place in different states. This was, however, a process which involved different people over a period of time. Those who established dynasties maintained control over different territories. Different names were given to these different states. Some of these names derived from the features of the environment such as hills, rivers, soil and vegetation, from the personal experiences of the dynastic founders or even of the whole movement.

Expansion took place until boundaries were established with another state belonging to the same or a different group. The commitment to, and the struggles over, boundaries again indicate the place of different groups and of a state-oriented territorial sovereignty in Yorubaland. A state had its territory. It was from this that the citizens, who in turn belonged to recognized lineages, had their own share of land. A ruler held control on the territory, and was recognized by other rulers as having the power and sovereignty. His power was limited to this territory. There were traditions to legitimise claims and the limits of expansion'. As the *Owa* of Ife put it in 1882: 'the boundaries of each state were well defined and regarded as sacred, so that nothing could induce any one to intrude into the territory of another'⁸. Hills, footpaths, streams, and other physical features were used as demarcations. Diplomacy. Treaties and rituals were also used to strengthen the agreements on boundaries. These boundaries separated areas of jurisdiction and interests. When these were threatened, disputes arose between states⁹.

(7) See for instance National Archives Ibadan (N.A.I.) Ekiti Division 1/1/518, *Akure-Ikere* boundary dispute, 1853, pp. 44-49.

(8) *British Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 63, Nigeria, p. 68.

(9) O. Adejuyigbe, *Boundary Problems in Western Nigeria: A Geographical Analysis* (University of Ife Press, 1975).

Sovereignty had meaning at the micro level. So, too, was citizenship. The people used their towns or group to identify themselves. For instance, a person from Owo saw himself as an *Omo Owo* or shortly as Owo (Owo's citizen) and would not define himself in a pan-Yoruba context. Strong group tendencies gave rise to, and probably promoted, parochial tendencies and cultural variations.

The mode of production recognized the central role of households. Production mechanisms depended on local initiatives and more on local raw materials¹⁰. The point here is not to suggest that there were no economic interactions, but that the mode of production could function, as a system, at the level of the community.

The same was true of the political system. Every state, except if it was a colony of another, was sovereign and constituted a recognizable territorial unit. Its government was also sovereign. Its rulers were the symbols of the state. They exercised judicial, executive and legislative powers. The political system of the states rested on a combination of the lineages different associations, and the paraphernalia of a central authority. At the lineage level, the *Baale* (or *olori ebi*), that is, the lineage head, was in charge. He exercised a penal authority limited to fines and minor impositions, and chastisement. Associations include age-grades and trade guilds, both of which exercised moral authority on their members. The institutions of the central states authority were dominated by the *oba*, the chiefs and the *oba-in-council*¹¹.

Institutions of government were replicated, but the pattern of authority showed variations. There was that of an empire represented by Oyo. Secondly, there was the Egba example where the various Egba states formed a loose confederation; and the Ife pattern with a centralized provincial administration. Yet there were states (such as the Ekiti, Ijebu, Ondo, Owo and Awori) where there was no large central political organization such as in the case of Oyo.

New changes were introduced in the 19th century¹². The military became pre-eminent in politics, primarily because of the insecurity of the age. The military had new ideas of government, arising from their crucial strategic functions and substantial wealth. Because they owed their prominence to

(10) Toyin Falola. *The Political Economy of a Pre-colonial African State: Ibadan 1830-1900*, (University of Ife Press, 1984).

(11) Toyin Falola and Dare Oguntomisin. *The Military In 19th Century Yoruba Politics*, (University of Ife Press, 1984). Chapter one.

(12) Toyin Falola. "Power Drift in the Political System of Southwestern Nigeria in the 19th century", *QDU: A Journal of West African Studies*, 21, Jan/July, 1981.

exploits in war, they tended to have little regard for the monarchichal institutions. New ideas were put into practice in Ibadan where a military aristocracy was established, in Ijaye which had a military dictatorship and in Oke-Odan and Abeokuta where a military federation was practised¹³.

CENTRIFUGAL TENDENCIES

The various Yoruba states maintained close relations with one another. The dominant ruling class in each state also had strong interests in promoting centrifugal tendencies primarily to widen the base of power and wealth. They employed several strategies to achieve this. Firstly, the myth of Oduduwa and of a common ancestry was used and popularized partly to strengthen the link between the ruling class and to prevent, as much as possible, the emergence of a counter-hegemonic force which could destroy the dynasties and royal families. The myth also reinforced the ownership and control of territories as well as of land. The affinal relationship referred to below served as a further justificatory ideology; so also were the exchanges of gifts, diplomatic practices, etc. Secondly, inter-group relations widened the network of market and of trade, thus increasing the avenues for profit by the enterprising members of the ruling class as well as the peasants. Thirdly and more importantly, wars were fought to subjugate neighbouring and distant polities. This enabled the accumulation of extensive booty in goods and men, as well as a considerable access to gifts and tribute. These massive gains have been clearly demonstrated in the case of Ibadan¹⁴ as well as in the activities of the leading war heroes of the 19th century¹⁵.

Factors of inter-group relations were diversified: trade, migrations, diplomacy, war, etc¹⁶. These can only be explained in brief. Migrations within the Yoruba region were common, and were brought about by a host of factors which included disputes over titles, flights from wars and political upheavals and the search for new and better abodes. The 19th century witnessed massive

(13) Falola and Oguntomisin, *The Military...*

(14) Toyin Falola, *The Political Economy...*

(15) Toyin Falola and Dare Oguntomisin, *Yoruba War Heroes*, (Ile-Ife: O.A.U. Press), forthcoming.

(16) Toyin Falola, "Factors of Inter-state Relations in West Africa", in A. Fajana and O. Anjorin, *From Kingdom to Colony: West Africa in the 19th Century*, (Nelson), forthcoming.

migrations which had the effect of altering the map of Yorubaland as well as the demographic compositions of the sub-regions¹⁷. Such migrations allowed for borrowing and the spread of culture. The diffusion of artefacts and aspects of social institutions is one major evidence of the impact of inter-group relations and their integrative role in the Yoruba region. For instance, the *Egungun-Oyo* (ancestral masquerades) spread from the north to the south and north-east during the 19th century. Similarly *Orisa-oko* (the cult of farming and fertility) and *Sango* (the deity of lightning and thunder) spread from the Oyo to the other Yoruba groups. Other institutions emanated from other areas and spread to the Oyo; an example of these was the *Epa* type masquerado headpieces.

The ruling dynasties in the various states forged relationship with one another by promoting 'brotherhood relations'. The cordial relations among them were sometimes explained in affinal relationship. Several of the royal families (members of the ruling class) claimed Oduduwa as an ancestor. These 'children of Oduduwa' constituted the dynasties in a good number of kingdoms. The number of these 'children' have been variously put at between seven and twenty one¹⁸. Inter-group relations among the kingdoms was fostered by this myth of common parenthood. This was occasionally demonstrated in coronation rituals when some of the kingdoms requested Ife for the staff of office of their new rulers¹⁹. Some claimed a secondary relations with the sons of Oduduwa, that is, the founders of their kingdoms were children of the sons of Oduduwa. For instance, Akure and Osogbo dynasties claimed blood relationship with the *Owa* of Ilesa (a 'son' of Oduduwa) while Iwo claimed a connection with the son of a female *Ooni* of Ife. Rulers who claimed to have been born by the same mother had common rituals in her remembrance. There were cases when the ruling dynasties in contiguous communities claimed a common descent from the same mother. In situations like this, members of the ruling class regarded themselves as siblings and forged deep relationships. Examples of this included the *Alara* of

(17) Toyin Falola and Dare Oguntomisin. "Refugees in 19th Century Yorubaland", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 21, 2, July 1987, pp. 67-79.

(18) Samuel Johnson. *The History of the Yorubas*, (Lagos, C.M.S. 1967 reprint) p. 78; W. Bascom. *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston Inc. 1973) p. 11.

(19) See for instance J.O. Otubobokun. *Itan Uyin*, (Yaba: Forward Press, 1952) p. 5 and N.A.I. Oyo Prof. 2/2/1372, *Yoruba Crowns, rights and privileges to wear by certain chiefs*.

Aramoko and the *Ajero* of Ijero; the *Elekole* of Ikole, the *Ewi* of Ado and the *Ajero*: Idanre and Benin; and the *Alaafin* of Oyo and the *Alake* of Abeokuta.

This 'blood' relationship was used to justify other important unifying measures such as the exchange of gifts, custody of one another's princes for effective training, exchange of visits by chiefs, etc.

Affinal relationship was also used to prevent conflicts among the members of the ruling class in the same state. Two or more ruling houses existed in most Yoruba states. Relationship among them could be cemented by marriage ties. The use of marriage, however, cut across states. For political strategy and to widen the network of relationship, princesses were betrothed to princes and chiefs in other states. Examples of this are many, and are well narrated in different traditions. Rulers of such states treated one another as 'cousins' and their people as 'kinsmen'. When the products of such marriages grew to acquire political power, inter-group relations was further strengthened because of their dual loyalty to two states.

The conjugal and affinal ties between rulers impacted upon how their subjects related to one another. The people followed their examples, that is, of exchanging sons and daughters. The idea of security, safety and 'kinsmen' were implied in such exchanges; in other words, they were exchanging with people in states where it was safe to do so. The network of social and blood relationship was, therefore, wide.

Though the several wars of the 19th century destroyed a good number of these affinal relationships, they were still remembered and also occasionally served to prevent large-scale hostilities and total destructions of communities. Ibadan, which built the most effective military machine in the century, occasionally considered this factor. It did not attack most Oyo-Yoruba states because their people were regarded as their kinsmen. Even when Ijaye - the rival Oyo-Yoruba state - was attacked in 1860, it had to be done after prolonged deliberations²⁰.

Concrete diplomacy was used to back up 'brotherhood relations'. The Yoruba, like most other African people, were conversant with the art and practices of diplomacy²¹. There were several conventions: diplomatic agents were recognised; the status and power of different diplomats were known; political agents were exchanged; the inviolability of the person of the diplomatic agent

(20) Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, p. 355.

(21) R.S. Smith. *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*, (Methuen, 1976).

was recognised; diplomatic communications were generally immune from interdiction; and symbols and signs were used as the secret language of diplomacy²².

War was yet another factor which brought communities together. Successful imperial wars put different states and sub-groups under a similar political umbrella. The Oyo were able to achieve this in the 17th and 18th centuries when they established an empire whose territorial extent was very wide²³. Most of the vassal colonies enjoyed autonomy but Oyo had to ratify the appointment of their *Oba* or *Baale*. In addition, they went to Oyo to obtain their titles and they could also be deposed by the *Alaafin*. They appeared periodically at Oyo where they re-affirmed their loyalty. The orders emanating from Oyo must be obeyed. There were Oyo's political agents resident in the colonies to monitor local developments.

Among the other factors making for cohesion were the blood and social relationship among the members of the dominant class in the various towns and villages, Oyo's military might and ability to subjugate and coerce the colonies, and the domination of commerce which enhanced the economic power of the metropolis at the expense of the colonies.

Wars were not caused mainly by the ambition for colonies. Other reasons included the desire of the ruling class for captives, struggles for the control of trade routes and breakdown of diplomatic relations.

Finally, most communities were linked by roads which served as arteries of trade and communications. The roads leading to a major town converged on its main market like 'the spokes of a wheel'²⁴, and the number of its principal gates showed as well the number of the dominant trade routes. There were several markets attended by sellers and buyers from different towns and villages. There were important nodal markets held periodically at the intervals on nine days. Nineteenth century examples included Ado, Ikare, Akure, Ilaro, Abeokuta, Oru, Ilorin, Egosi, Ofa, Apowu, Ilesa and Okebode. And since trade encouraged considerable movement of people, the various states developed the methods of dealing with strangers. The ruling class had jurisdiction over its territories and

(22) Toyin Falola. "The Ibadan Conference of 1855: Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution in Mid-Nineteenth Century Yorubaland", *Geneve-Afrique*, Vol. XXIII, n° 2, 1985, pp. 38-56.

(23) J.A. Atanda. *The New Oyo Empire: Indirect Rule and Change, in western Nigeria, 1894-1934*, (Longman, 1973) p. 13.

(24) E. Krapf Askari. *Yoruba Towns and Cities: An Enquiry into the Nature of Urban Social Phenomenon*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969) pp. 39-50.

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sovereign power to protect strangers. Because the ruling class benefitted from the payment of tolls, gifts and market dues, it took the protection of traders and all other strangers with seriousness. There were toll gates to monitor entries and collect customs, and officials in charge of trade and the maintenance of peace and security. The supreme authority over the control of routes and market was vested in the ruling class. As *oba* was also known as the *oloja* ('owner of markets') and he delegated some of these responsibilities to market officials known by various names and titles (e.g., *Parakoyi* among the Egba, *Ipampa* in Ijebu, *Oba Oja* in Yagba). Strangers were also allowed to settle in states of their choice. They only had to identify with the lineages of their choice through which they could have access to land and re-define their citizenship.

Because of the factors which have been mentioned, it is possible to treat Yorubaland as a region. The factors also made it easier for members of the contemporary dominant class to have strong reasons which they could employ to articulate a Yoruba identity. Yet, there were strong factors in the pre-colonial era which provided a link between the Yoruba groups and the others in Nigeria, and which can also be used to forge a pan-Nigerian consciousness.

THE YORUBA AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS

First, the group in the peripheries as well as in the border zones inevitably had to interact with their neighbours. Secondly, all the Yoruba sub-groups had contacts with other non-Yoruba in the West African region. Both forms of interactions revolved around diplomacy, trade, cultural ties and wars. They were also well developed and encouraged the penetration of ideas, goods and people. They were promoted by ecological differences, the necessity of mutual inter-dependence, the benefits from a wider commercial and economic network, and imperial desires. A few examples of such relations are briefly discussed here.

Oyo's relations with its northern neighbours, notably the Nupe and Bariba, was very rewarding for its several impact. A number of lineages in the northern Oyo towns traced their origins to the Nupe and Bariba. Some groups, such as those in Okuta and Kenu in southern Borgu which claimed an original Yoruba origin, were incorporated by the Bariba. The same was true of Obadegi,

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originally Yoruba but now absorbed by the Nupe²⁵. This process of assimilation suggests a long history of relations. Traditions do indicate inter-group relations between Oyo and its northern neighbours before the 15th century. Early Oyo history was closely connected with developments in Nupe and Borguland to the extent that Oyo's traditions of origin in fact mention dynastic links with these two places²⁶. These traditions represent Oyo's perceptions of the importance of the relationship between it and its two northern neighbours. In the 16th century, the relations took the forms of wars, trade, and exchange of cultures. Nupe invaded Oyo under *Allafin* Onigbogi, and this resulted in a temporary collapse of the empire and the *Allafin's* exile to Borgu. The Bariba also attacked Oyo during the same period. These military invasions encouraged the spread of culture. The Nupe Egungun (masquerade) cult, Islam, and the use of horses for war were all introduced to Oyo. The latter intensified commercial relations, as the need for horses to build cavalry forces increased. In the 18th century, the search for more slaves to sell in the Atlantic trade forced Oyo to turn to its northern neighbours, again expanding the commercial network. In the last years of the 18th century relations deteriorated, and military confrontations marked the relationship. By 1789, Oyo was paying tribute, to the Nupe.²⁷ Relations after this year moved in the direction of the final collapse of Oyo. By 1817, a Muslim rebellion had broken out, and a large part of north-eastern Yorubaland had to be incorporated into the Muslim emirate of Ilorin.

Relations with the north was not exclusive to the Nupe and Bariba. The economic integration of Yorubaland into the Hausa commercial network was very deep.²⁸ Hausa traders brought goods of diverse origins to Yorubaland in exchange for kolanuts and other products.

The Benin expansion into the area of modern Ondo and Lagos states from the 16th to the 19th centuries is equally significant. Benin trading associations travelled to Akure, Ekitiland, Owo and other places in the northeast. Known as

(25) National Archives, Kaduna, DOB/HIS/35, H.L. Norton-Trail, *South Borgu*, 1908; and E.G.M. Dupigny, *Gazetteer of Nupe Province*, (London, 1921) p. 84.

(26) See for instance Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba*, pp. 3-11; M. Crowder, *Revolt in Bussa: a Study of British 'Native Administration' in Nigerian Borgu, 1902-1935*, (London: 1973) pp. 29-30 and M.C. Adeyemi, *Iwe Itan Oyo Ile ati Oyo Isisiyi*, (Ibadan, 1945) pp. 5-7.

(27) R. Norris, *Memoires of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomey* (London, 1789) p. 139.

(28) Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Interregional Monetary Flows in the Precolonial Trade of Nigeria', *Journal of African History*, XV, 1974, pp. 536-585.

the *Ekhen-Egbo* ('traders of the forest'), these trading associations made it possible for European goods to penetrate far deep into the hinterland²⁹. There were other links such as the dynastic links between Ife and Benin, cultural interaction, and military conquests. On the latter, Benin was able to subdue the Awori kingdom of Lagos. In the 15th century, Benin invaded Ekiti and Akoko. Ikere and Akure became Benin's military outpost from where further encroachment was made. By the last decade of the 16th century, Benin military presence was felt in Otun. Distance from Benin prevented the development of a strong control over Ekiti; but far-reaching legacies were left in the area of political, economic and cultural aspects. Benin traders were able to operate, with the military might at the background. Some Yoruba states also paid tributes to Benin. Such political connections were often expressed in terms of blood relationship between a senior and a junior brother.

In the 19th century, the Nupe established a strong presence in northeastern Yorubaland³⁰. This enabled the spread into this area of Nupe's artefacts and social institutions such as the *ndako-gboya* masquerades and bronze bells.

Several implications can be drawn from these various contacts. Firstly, the Yoruba groups did not limit their interactions to themselves. Indeed, Yoruba states that were close to non-Yoruba neighbours interacted extensively with one another. For instance, before the 19th century, "the eastern Yoruba kingdoms, especially those of the Ekiti, Akoko and Owo, were drawn more towards the centre of the Benin kingdom in the south-east than westwards and north-westwards towards the main centre of Yoruba civilization"³¹. Oyo, too, interacted more with the Nupe and Bariba than with most other Yoruba states, including Ife³². Secondly, these interactions have continued, in spite of new boundaries, new administrative centres and the appeal by the ruling class to ethnic sentiments. However, these interactions have to be transformed into a

(29) S.A. Akintoye. 'The North-eastern Yoruba district and the Benin Kingdom', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4,4, 1969.

(30) M. Mason. 'The Jihad in the South: An Outline of the 19th Century Nupe hegemony in North-eastern Yorubaland and Afonnai', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, V. 2, 1970, pp. 193-209.

(31) S.A. Akintoye. *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840-1893: Ibadan Expansion and the Rise of Ekitiparapo*, (Longman, 1971) p. 29.

(32) R.C.C. Law. 'The Oyo Kingdom and its northern neighbours', *Kano Studies*, New Series, 1, 1, 1973.

political 'community' which would be strong enough to withstand divisive measures.

FROM ETHNOCENTRIC VALUES TO ETHNIC RIVALRIES

One implication that flows from some of the preceding discussions is that the Yoruba have factors which they could raise to the status of ethnocentric values. In spite of variations, they could talk of cultural similarities and of social formations with communal boundaries. The Yoruba language is also an important variable. These are factors that could effectively serve the cause of ethnocentrism, that is, a pride in the group, and in the group's beliefs and identify. Carried to its logical conclusion, ethnocentrism encourages insular tendencies, group pride, group identity and parochialism.

The origins of recent ethnocentrism were developed in the 19th century. During the century, a name to refer to all the Yoruba sub-groups emerged. Names such as *Aku*, *Nagun*, *Anago*, *Olukuni* (and its variants of *Uloumy*, *Lukumi*, *Ulkama* and *Ulkame*) and Yoruba had been invented by neighbours and European visitors to describe the various Yoruba groups³³. Of all these, Yoruba became the most popular. Originally rejected by other sub-groups, the term 'Yoruba' was popularized by missionaries and European travellers and officials. The effective use of 'Yoruba' began in Sierra Leone, when missionaries were interested in studying African languages, and had to study that of the linguistic group to which Oyo belonged³⁴. By the last decade of the 19th century when Samuel Johnson had completed his classic, *The History of the Yorubas*, the term had become popular, at least among the educated elite as well as in European circles.

More important than the name was Yoruba consciousness which developed among the liberated slaves in Sierra Leone, and which they imported into Nigeria

(33) S. W. Koelle. *Polyglotta Africana or a Comparative Vocabulary of nearly 300 words and phrases in more than one hundred distinct African Languages*, (London: C.M.S 1963 reprint; original 1853) p. 5, and P. Mercier, 'Notice Sur Le Peuplement Yoruba', *Etudes Dahomeennes*, 4, 1950, p. 29.

(34) One of the earliest recorded use of the term is in J. Rabans, *The Eyo Vocabulary*, III, (London, 1832) p. 10.

from 1838 onward³⁵. From among the returnees and the products of missionary educations introduced in the second half of the century emerged an educated elite. This elite was interested in key positions in the church and civil service, in dominating commerce and also in sharing power with the 'traditional' elite³⁶. They perceived Europeans as opponents who stood in their way to achieve their ambitions. One way to overcome the threat posed by Europeans was to promote ethnocentric values partly to strengthen intra-class unity and provide ideological rationalization for some of their enterprising moves to indigenise the church and set up businesses of their own.

Several ethnocentric values assumed importance. The myth of a common origin was popularized to create a pan-Yoruba identity and destroy the group loyalties which the 19th century wars had effectively consolidated. Language, too, became another factor, while they also began to emphasize the similarities in Yoruba culture. From 1875 till the end of the century, some Yoruba elite promoted Ethiopianism - that is, 'African nationalism expressed through the medium of the church'³⁷. Ethiopianism and other aspects of missionary activities and reactions to the Europeans engendered cultural nationalism and ethnocentric values. During this period, the Lagos press became virulent, the educated faction advocated several reforms and changes, including the establishment of an African University, and respected Yoruba 'scholars' emerged. On the latter, a flourishing Yoruba historiography was born, culminating in the writing of Johnson's work. Patriotism to the Yoruba underlined most of these writings.

During the 20th century, ethnocentric values gave way to ethnic rivalries, as the former became transformed in the service of the latter. The Yoruba faction of the national bourgeoisie began to articulate and manipulate a common consciousness of the Yoruba identity in relation to other ethnic groups. This engendered competitions with others, and were expressed in inter-ethnic conflicts and inter-ethnic discriminations in job opportunities and access to national resources.

The development of ethnicity owed much to colonial policies and programmes which created new class structures and relations. The dominant class in the colonial era, which subsequently inherited power in 1960, thrived on the manipulation of ethnicity for private ends. It was not difficult for them to do

(35) For more on these emigrants, see J.H. Kopytoff, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria: The "Sierra Leonians" in Yoruba, 1830-1890*, (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965).

(36) A discussion on their interests is in E.A. Ayandele, *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society*, (Ibadan University Press, 1974)

(37) E.A. Ayandele. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*, (Longmans, 1966) p. 177.

so because the British did a lot to promote divisions along ethnic lines. Okwudiba Knoli has studied some of these measures and has shown how ethnicity has deliberately been politicized for private ends³⁸.

A genuinely nationalist, pan-Nigeria political party did not emerge by 1960, when the country obtained its independence. Rather, what the country had during the crucial era of decolonization were parties based on ethnic lines. In the case of the Yoruba, a far-reaching political expression of ethnic conflict was taken in 1945 with the formation of cultural-sum-political society known as the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* (the descendants of the children of Oduduwa) by Chief Awolowo³⁹. One of the aims behind it was to manipulate the idea of Yoruba identity and consciousness in order to compete with other Nigerian groups. It held its inaugural meeting in Lagos on November, 28, 1947 and subsequently couched its aims in ethnic context. These included, *inter alia*: (a) the fostering of the spirit of co-operation, unity and brotherhood among the descendants of Oduduwa; (b) the coordination of educational and cultural programmes among the Yoruba; (c) 'to discourage intra-tribal prejudice among descendants of Oduduwa whom for linguistic differences failed to recognize themselves as branches from the same stock; and (d) 'to strive for the preservation of the traditional monarchical form of government of western Nigeria as to fit in properly in any future political set up for the government of Nigeria'⁴⁰.

From 1945 onwards, the *Egbe* designed a host of strategies to pursue its aims and compete with other ethnic groups, notably the Igbo (who also had the Ibo State Union) and the northern intelligentsia who, in 1948, also established cultural-sum-political union known as the *Jam'yyar Mutanen Arewa* (the Association of Peoples of the North). Certain aspects of the *Egbe's* strategy were built on ethnocentric values. It created the Oduduwa National Day, an annual event fixed for June 5 during which youths engaged in athletic competitions, and thanksgiving services held in churches and mosques⁴¹. Obas and chiefs were mobilized, and several of them identified with the aims and activities of the *Egbe*. As a political strategy, the *Egbe* justified the need for chiefs in any new political arrangement. The *Egbe* members went further to acquire honorary

(38) O. Nnoli. *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, (Emugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980).

(39) See S. O. Arifalo, "Ethnic Political Consciousness In Nigeria 1967-1951", *Geneve Afrique* Vol. XXXIV, N° 1, 1986, pp. 7-34.

(40) *The Constitution of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, (Ijebu Ode, 1948).

(41) See details in O.A. Sobande, *Path to Unity and Culture: Being a Comprehensive Survey of Principles And Practice of Egbe Omo Oduduwa* (Lagos, 1952) mimeo.

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chieftaincy titles. Finally, the *Egbe* took an interest in the propagation of Yoruba history and culture. As part of this it established a Literature Committees to encourage writings into Yoruba history and culture, and commissioned individuals to examine specific aspects.

It was the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa* that later constituted the core of the Action Group, a political party with a substantial Yoruba base. In most of the 'struggles' - conflicts for power and wealth - the dominant elite obscures the pursuit of its selfish interests by championing the cause of ethnic groups. How the dominant class achieves this, that is, hiding self interests under the cover of ethnic interests, has been well explained by B.J. Dudley:

Political competition was seen by the elites in 'zero sum' and not 'positive sum' terms, with the players drawn at any given time in a set of binary oppositions: East (or Ibo) versus West (or Yoruba): North against East, or the South against the North. In each instance, the interests of the elite were generalized by its members to be congruent with the interests of the collective with which they are identified. Thus, Ibo elite interests were made to appear to be the interests of the Ibo-speaking peoples and at another remove, the interests of the peoples of the Eastern Region.

Similarly the interests of the Yoruba elite (or the Northern elite) were equated with the interests of the Yoruba (or of the peoples of the North as the case might be). This entailed (a) that criticism of a member of the elite became, by the logic of things, an attack on the collective with which he is identified; and (b) since political competition was conceived in 'zero sum' terms, that the group interest was equated with the national or rather, the 'public interests' where the latter term is taken to be equivalent to 'those interests which people have in common qua members of the public'. In effect, this amounts to a denial that there could be a 'public interest' other than the interest of a particular group or groups.⁴²

(42) B.J. Dudley. *Instability And Political Order: Politics And Crisis In Nigeria* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973) p. 164.

FALOLA, Toyin. Pré-colonial origins of the national question in Nigeria: The Yoruba identity as a case study. *África: Revista do Centro de Estudos Africanos*. USP, S. Paulo, 12-13 (1): 3-24, 1989/1990.

CONCLUSION

The analysis we have provided in this paper is relevant to the contemporary National Question. We have provided sufficient evidence to show that:

- a) states which operated within the Yoruba-speaking region constituted socio-political units which were sovereign;
- b) the Yoruba-speaking people did not constitute a single, socio-political unit during the long pre-colonial era;
- c) the consciousness and manipulation of a pan-Yoruba identity began in the 19th century and was intensified in the 20th century;
- d) this process of intensification can be attributed to British policies and the politicization of ethnicity since independence;
- e) the different Yoruba states established relations with one another; indeed each state forged an identity through the use of myths, and most states were united by several factors. The dominant class in all the states attempted to use myths and other factors to forge a unity as well as create a legitimacy for power and authority;
- f) states in Yorubaland related with others in the Nigerian polity - commerce, cultural borrowings, war, inter-marriage, diplomacy etc., constituted strong factors of relations. The big kingdoms which incorporated many states, sub-groups and groups promoted a great deal of interactions. The various Nigerian communities had reasons to come together long before the imposition of colonial rule.

Several implications can be drawn from the above, but only three is attempted here. In the first place, different groups can co-exist within a region, though this can be characterized by both peaceful and hostile relations. To achieve peace, integrative factors have to be promoted and built into such relations. Secondly, as the case of the Yoruba has demonstrated, group parochialism could be sub-merged to achieve a pan-national ambition and interests. Thirdly, within the Yoruba region, group values re-emerged in the

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contest for power, resources and other competitive interests. In other words, identity gets interpreted and re-interpreted at several levels and in several ways:

- a) at the national level, a pan-Yoruba identity is created;
- b) at the regional/state level, a group identity is emphasized;
- c) at the group/local government level, a township identity is emphasized;
- d) at the township level, a ward/quarter/lineage identity is pushed;
- e) at the ward/quarter/lineage level, a micro/nuclear/blood family relationship is forged.

Then above variations impact upon the relevance and use of history. It subjects history to abuse, manipulation and propaganda. Policy options have to consider this. For instance, suggestions on confederacy ignore the fact that the values and interests of a sub-ethnic group easily assume dominance. Federalism, on the other hand, enables pan-Yoruba consciousness to flourish. The emergence of a relevant ideology that would transform the Nigerian society must grapple with the problems of building a pan-Nigerian consciousness. More importantly, it has to focus on values that cut across ethnic boundaries.

RESUMO: No presente trabalho o autor procura evidenciar as origens pré-coloniais da questão nacional nigeriana, apolando-se na identidade Yoruba como estudo de caso. Para expor suas idéias aborda aspectos relacionados com a importância do Estado no interior dos grupos Yoruba na época pré-colonial, com a dominação territorial, com a sobrevivência da identidade Yoruba nos períodos pré e pós coloniais e com a emergência de uma consciência Yoruba pós-colonial incentivada pelos contatos com os ingleses.

UNITERMOS: Nigéria contemporânea, Questão nacional, Identidade.