The Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria

The Yoruba people constitute one of the largest single ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. They are spread across four West African countries, Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and Sierra Leone, the largest concentration being in Nigeria. The Yoruba people in Nigeria are the dominant group in south-western Nigeria. With the carving of the Nigerian Federation into smaller states, the Yoruba came fully to occupy six states, namely Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, Ondo. Kwara and Kogi, which were carved out of the former Northern Region, are partly Yoruba states. The Yorùbá, though culturally homogenous, were differentiated into regional sub-groups, like the Oyo, Ijebu, Ife, Ekiti, Egba, Ijesha, Ikale, Ilaje, Akoko and others, obviously from very early times.

The peopling of Yorubaland has been explained differently, ranging from the most fanciful to the most plausible. These accounts include the story of direct descent from heaven or the sky as popularised by traditional historians, and stories of migrations from different places as stressed by professional or academic historians. However, both the stories of creation and of migrations emphasise the importance of Oduduwa in the emergence and spread of the Yoruba as a group. At the same time, some of the traditions hint at the existence of some autochthonous groups beginning from Ile-Ife (which is generally acknowledged as the cradle of Yoruba civilisation) before the emergence of Oduduwa.

A version of the history has it that the Yoruba migrated from the North-east and settle down in Ile-Ife. According to this tradition, they left colonies of themselves on their way, one of which is reputed to be Gobir in Northern Nigeria. The group that finally settled down in Ile-Ife was led by Oduduwa. This version has it that Oduduwa later established prosperous kingdom in Ile-Ife from where his children dispersed to found the kingdom. Fourteen of such kingdoms founded by sons of Oduduwa were already large and prosperous at the end of eighteenth century.

The second version claims that Ile-Ife is the centre of earth and creation. According to this tradition, the whole of earth was once filled with water and God sent his messenger to go and create farmland out of the liquid mass. The group of sixteen immortals was led by Obatala. They were given five pieces of iron, a lump of earth tied to a white piece of cloth and a cockerel. According to this version, Obatala became drunk on enroute with palmwine and Oduduwa who was one of the group of sixteen seized the ritual package and eventually led the delegation to the world landing in Ile-Ife. There the five pieces of iron were set down, the lump earth placed on it, and the chicken made to spread the earth with its toes. This act made farmlands with subsequent spread to cover the whole earth to appear.

Without gainsaying this, the emergence of Oduduwa radically transformed the Yorùbá society, particularly with the centralisation of political authority and the adoption of Arè or Adé (beaded crown) as a symbol of royal authority. This important innovation eventually became the basis for identifying the direct descendants of Odùduwà and also for legitimising political authority or kingship in Yorubaland, both in the past and the present. However, the revolution associated with the arrival of Odùduwà did not obliterate the existence of the autochthonous group or their traditions. This perhaps explains why references are still made to them up to the present time

It would seem that the popularisation of the Oduduwa legend portrays an attempt to write the history of political leaders or the elite in Yorubaland, particularly to the detriment of the masses. This observation is corroborated by the portrayal of Oduduwa as an external force with considerable might and will with which he imposed himself on the autochthonous groups, such that the history of Ile-Ife and by extension that of the Yoruba became woven around him from thenceforward. In addition, the use to which the Oduduwa factor has been put in contemporary

Yorubaland and Nigeria as a whole confirms this observation.

The Spread

Oduduwa called his children together when he was old and ordered them to disperse and found kingdom of themselves. Indeed, population expansion and pressures on the land induced migrations out of Ile-Ife. The migration intensified when Ile-Ife was struck by a prolonged drought that caused great famine and malnutrition for a protracted length of time. As a result, a decision was taken that the best way to solve the problem was for some people to emigrate. A meeting was summoned at a place which still bears the name of Ita Ijero (place of deliberation) where a decision was taken as to what direction each party should take, and how future contacts were to be made with Ile-Ife and among the migrants, who were led by princes who belonged to the Oduduwa group (Olaniyan, 1985; p.37).

Although it is not known how many kingdoms the Oduduwa princes established after the dispersal, Olaniyan (1985) surmised that "not fewer than 16 kingdoms are known to have been formed after the Ife model in various parts of Yorubaland" (p.37). Among them were Ado, Ara, Egba, Egbado, Ijero, Ikole, Otun, Oye and Oyo. Each of the dispersing groups built their kingdoms by displacing the heads of preexisting communities and instituting a political system patterned after the Ile-Ife model with slight modifications.

The hub of the Yoruba empire was metropolitan Oyo, the home of the Yorubas who spoke the Oyo dialect and who were for practical purposes identifiable with the people of Old Oyo. This area was divided into 6 large provinces, three to the west of the River Ogun and three to the east. South of metropolitan Oyo, there were other Yoruba kingdoms such as Egba and Egbado, whose peoples spoke different Yoruba dialects.

Oyo extended over non-Yoruba areas to the southwest: the Aja states of Dahomey and the Ewe of Togo. But, "imperial policy toward these non-Yoruba states was to allow them almost total local independence provided that they did not seek to escape from their tributary status" (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:296). This imperial policy of "indirect rule" was identical to the Asante's. Although autonomous, the kingdoms were bonded closely together and continued to share ideas. Since all were sons or grandsons of Oduduwa, the succeeding rulers of the kingdoms (as well as their subjects) considered themselves kinsmen (Ebi), periodic renewal of contacts with the ancestral spirit at IleIfe was maintained.

The sizes and complexities of these secondary kingdoms varied considerably, ranging from Oyo, covering over 10,000 square miles, to the miniature states of Ekiti, where, for example, the Ewi of Ado ruled over only some 17 small towns and villages. The larger kingdoms were subdivided into provinces. In addition, there were city-states, such as Badagry and Egbado towns. But all of these were "internally autonomous in a quasi-federalism" (Smith, 1969, p.110). Among these states Ife enjoyed seniority and prestige. Its ruler, the Oni, commanded respect not so much as the ruler of one of the Yoruba group of kingdoms, since Ife is not remembered as having attained political or military importance, but as the king of a town which was regarded as the cradle of the race and whence the rulers and leading elements in the population of most of the other kingdoms traced their origins…Each of the Yoruba states was a sovereign entity, though related by tradition and sentiment to Ife and the other states of the Ife family (much like the ties between the 7 Hausa Bakwai of northern Nigeria) (Smith, 1969; p.108).

Indigenous Political System

The Yoruba system of government was extremely complex and might appear confusing to outsiders. But the political systems of the various constituent kingdoms were in general similar. The basic political unit was the town (ilu), which was made up of lineages. A typical Yoruba kingdom was made up of many towns, villages, markets and farmsteads. One of these served as the capital town where the king (oba) lived. This leading oba was the wearer of a beaded crown, bestowed on his ancestor, according to legend, from Ife and his town was defined as ilu alade (crowned town) to distinguish it from other towns. Subordinate towns were classified as ilu ereko (literally, "towns on the fringe of the farmland"), which in turn ranged from ilu oloja (a

market town with an oba not entitled to wear a beaded crown) to the ileto (village), abule (hamlet) and ago or aba (camp, settlement).

Each settlement was organized in a hierarchical form. The component lineages were headed by male adults called Baale (or Bale — father of the house), who oversaw the administration of the town. At the apex was the headchief or oba, who claimed descendancy from Oduduwa. The oba was the natural head of his own people and selected according to purely local custom. However, his appointment had to be confirmed by the central government at Oyo. Thus, Yoruba towns were ruled by their own obas chosen from the local ruling lineages and their policies had to be confirmed by local councils made up of heads of non-ruling families and local societies. Yet even with the full force of local opinion behind him, it would be a brave oba who dared offend the imperial government at Oyo (Stride and Ifeka, 1971; p.297).

As the head of government, the oba was politically supreme, and as the executive head, he exercised considerable powers: he could arrest, punish or reward any of his subjects. But Olaniyan (1985) further argued: In practice, however, the oba was not an absolute ruler. His powers were checked in a number of ways and more importantly, he did not rule singlehandedly but in conjunction with a council of chiefs known generally as the Iwarefa. The chiefs on the council were usually grouped into two parallel lines representing commoners' interests and princely interests (p.43).

Smith (1969) reached similar conclusions: The sacred aspect of Yoruba kingship did not lead to the oba becoming an autocrat but rather the reverse. Not only was he bound by rules and precedents in his personal life but these also required him to submit all business to councils of chiefs and officers, and only after consultation and deliberation by these bodies could a policy be decided upon and proclaimed in the oba's name. Every oba had at least one council of chiefs who formed a powerful, usually hereditary, cabinet, and in most kingdoms there were lesser councils for the regulation of the different aspects of government. Thus the oba was at least as much fettered by constitutional procedure as a ruler in a modern democracy. Moreover, the chieftaincies were hereditary with the `descent group' or extended families which made up the population of the town. Thus the chiefs were representatives of their family groups as well as being officials of the king and the kingdom (p.111). (Italics mine).

The supreme king over all was the Alafin (or Alaafin) at Oyo. His duties to sub-states were as considerable as those owed to him by the sub-rulers, so that "the essential basis of the empire was mutual self-interest" (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:298). Both tributary kings and provincial governors (of metropolitan Oyo) had the duty of collecting tribute due to Oyo and for contributing contingents of troops under local generalship to the imperial army in times of major war. All sub-rulers had to pay homage to the Alafin. The acknowledgment of the duty of allegiance was renewed yearly by compulsory attendance at important religious ceremonies. The most important of these was the Bere festival, which was celebrated to mark public acclamation of successful rule by an Alafin. After a Bere festival, there was supposed to be peace in Yorubaland for three years.

For his part, it was the responsibility of the Alafin to protect tributary states from external aggression, particularly from the north (Muslim). It was also the duty of the Alafin to settle internal quarrels between his sub-rulers and between individual sub-rulers and their peoples. He was thus the supreme judge of the empire; his court was the final court of appeal. The Alafin was carefully selected and commanded enormous respect. No man could be considered for elevation to the imperial throne unless he was directly descended from Oranyan, the founder of Old Oyo. Yet the office did not automatically pass from father to son for there were several distinct lineages of royal descent (Stride and Ifeka; p.298).

The actual selection of a new Alafin was in the hands of the Oyo Mesi, a supreme council of state, whose seven members were collectively recognized as king-makers. They consulted the Ifa oracle as to which of the candidates was approved by the gods. The new Alafin was then proclaimed as the appointment of the gods. He was consecrated in his office by important

religious and political ceremonies during which he was initiated into the mysteries of kingship and control of the sacred cults. Once these rituals had been completed, he was no longer regarded as an ordinary mortal: he was "Ekeji Orisa", companion of the gods, a semi-divine beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. He was the head of his people in the inseparable sphere of administration, religion, and justice. (This consecration of the Alafin may be compared with that of the Asantehene who was lowered three times, lightly touching a blackened stool with his buttocks, or to that of the Japanese emperor in the daijo-sai ritual.)

The Alafin's power, in theory, was unlimited by human agency. Cult priests and government officials were alike appointed by his command; and the usual practice was for the Alafin to appoint eunuchs loyal to himself. In practice, the Alafin did not have such absolute power. He could ill afford to offend the members of the Oyo Mesi or the Ogboni (earth cult). Although he could not be deposed, the Alafin could be compelled to commit suicide. If both the Oyo Mesi and the Ogboni disapproved of his personal conduct or policies, or if the Oyo peoples suffered serious reverses, they would commission the Bashorun to present the Alafin with an empty calabash or a dish of parrot's eggs. On handing over these meaningful symbols, the Bashorun pronounced a fearful formula: `The gods reject you, the people reject you, the earth rejects you.' The Alafin was thus informed that his political position had been completely undermined and his removal decided. Custom demanded he take poison (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:299).

Smith (1969) maintained that: The Alafin was not always the dominant figure or wielded autocratic power; he was in fact subject, like all Yoruba oba to elaborate restraints embedded in the custom (which can justificably be called the constitution) of the kingdom. He had to submit his decisions in the first place to his council of seven notabilities, the Oyo Mesi, whose principal officer was the chief known as the Basorun. In turn, the Oyo Mesi were checked by the council of Ogboni, a society which, in its worship of the earth, embodied both religious and political sanctions. An Alafin of strong and resolute character could initiate and carry through a policy, obtaining the support and perhaps sometimes overruling the opposition of his counsellors. But not all Alafin were of this calibre, and the constitutional restraints on them were always stringent. The Oyo Mesi were even entitled to pronounce a sentence of rejection on an Alafin, upon whose receipt (it was sometimes tactfully conveyed by a symbolic gift of parrots' eggs), the king was bound to commit suicide. The first recorded rejection and suicide seems to be that of Alafin Ayibi. Another rule, apparently established during the reign of Ojigi, provided that the Aremo, the Alafin's eldest son, should take poison on his father's death, the intention being doubtless to protect the oba and his officers against the possible ambitions of a prince who was usually associated with his father in the Government.

The Bashorun, head of the Oyo Mesi, was a sort of prime minister. He was in charge of the religious divinations held annually to determine whether or not the Alafin retained the approval of the gods. This may be considered an "annual performance review" or spiritual "vote of confidence." The Bashorun was in a position to influence important decisions of the Oyo Mesi and the Ogboni. In fact, for a period in the 18th century, the Bashorun wielded more authority than the Alafin. This was largely because the Alafin could be divorced from politics by strict adherence to religious taboos that secluded him from his subjects whereas the Bashorun was always in the center of power.

The Ogboni was a very powerful secret society composed of freemen noted for their age, wisdom and importance in religious and political affairs. The Ogboni was concerned with the worship of earth, and was thus responsible for judging any cases involving the spilling of blood. The leader had unqualified right of direct access to the Alafin on any matter. Even the most important decisions of the Oyo Mesi, especially the rejection of an Alafin, could not be carried without Ogboni approval. As Stride and Ifeka (1971) put it: Whereas the Oyo Mesi represented the great politicians of the real, the Ogboni was the voice of popular opinion backed by the authority of religion. Although the members of the Oyo Mesi were ex-officio members of the Ogboni, they were not its senior members even though their informed opinions must have commanded respect.

The Oyo Mesi and Ogboni thus provided important constitutional checks on the personal authority of the Alafin. He was bound to listen to their advice and to ignore their opinions was to invite rejection… These constitutional safeguards eventually worked against the interests of strong central government. Except in times of exceptional danger, there was an unfortunate tendency to select a weak Alafin to succeed one of strong character and marked achievements lest a succession of autocratic rulers should transform the constitution into an absolute despotism. It is a little baffling why the authors should describe this tendency as "unfortunate." But what comes out clearly is yet another evidence of the fear of the African people of the ever-present threat of despotism and their fervid desire to curb the powers of their rulers through various constitutional and religious checks. It is also remarkable how the Alafin was enjoined to listen to the advice of his councilors or face rejection (removal) — an injunction characteristic of most indigenous systems of government. More astonishing is the absence of similar injunctions in modern systems of government in Africa.

The royal court formed one of the three pillars of government at Oyo, the two others being the Oyo Mesi and the Ogboni. In addition to the Ogboni, other cult organizations, usually of lesser importance, existed in all towns and kingdoms; at Oyo, the Egungun, a masked association led by the Alapini, a member of the Oyo Mesi, exercised an important influence on government by virtue of its function of recalling ancestors. Overlapping and parallel with all these bodies were associations of chiefs concerned with particular aspects of government and daily life, especially the conduct of war, trade, and of hunting. Among the Egba the leading chiefs were members of the Ogboni; the Parakoyi were the trade chiefs, while the hunters, who in war acted as scouts for the main army, were grouped together as the ode (or Eso). Under Lisabi a fourth order was created in the towns, the Olorogun, the leaders of the militia or war chiefs. They were individually appointed for their military skill and valor in war, and their rank was not hereditary. At the head of the Eso was the Are-Ona-Kakanfo, supreme commander of the imperial army. This official was customarily required to live in a frontier province of great strategic importance in imperial defense. "Thus he was well placed to guarantee imperial security against attack and was too far removed from the capital to interfere directly in central politics" (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:300). In fact to ensure this, he was debarred from entering the capital except with permission. This minimized, if not precluded, the possibility of military coup d'etats.

On all major campaigns, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo personally commanded in the field. He was obliged to win victories, as a defeat carried with it the punishment of commivitting suicide. He could escape the consequence of failure by fleeing to found a separate state a safe distance away from imperial retribution. "Thus did Oyo protect itself against hesitant generalship in the field and `retire' those generals who clung to military command when their martial vigour was declining" (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:300).

The Oyo Empire of the Niger Delta (Nigeria) also developed an elaborate system of checks and balances to guard against despotism as may be recalled from the previous chapter. The political system centered around four powerful figures: the Alafin, the Bashorun, the Oluwo and the Kankafo. Theoretically, all power came from Alafin who was considered semidivine. Next to the Alafin was the Bashorun, the leader of the Oyo Mesi or Council of Notables, made up of seven prominent lineage chiefs of the capital. Furthermore, the councilors held judicial power with the Alafin in the capital. But the Alafin had no control over the appointment of the councilors since, as chiefs, they were lineage appointed. Thus the Bashorun, who dominated the Oyo Mesi, had an ultimate check upon the Alafin.

The third power in the empire was the Ogboni headed by the Oluwo. The Ogboni chiefs, like the Oyo Mesi, were lineageappointed. They also had judicial functions, but their primary function was the preservation of the Ife oracle which could accept or reject the Bashorun's decision to command the Alafin's suicide. But the Alafin's representative sat on the Ogboni council and his opinion carried considerable weight. Thus, he could use this position to check ambitious Bashoruns. The Kakanfo was the field marshal with his seventy war chiefs, the Eso, who were expected to be loyal to the Alafin. The army was responsible to the Oyo Mesi who appointed and

promoted its officers. But wouldn't the Kakanfo overthrow the Oyo Mesi and seize power? That was not possible, according to Boahen and Webster (1970): Civil authority feared the potential power of the Kakanfo and in order to isolate him from politics he was usually of humble (slave) origin and was forbidden to enter the capital city. The political system was thus a complex and delicate balance with checks and counterchecks against concentration of power in one man's hands (p.90).

The system of government of the capital was repeated on a smaller scale in the provincial towns of the kingdom, and paralleled also in the subject kingdoms. There are many indications that these later were allowed by Oyo to retain a large measure of independence, although regular tribute had to be paid and the Alafin sometimes assumed the right to nominate a new ruler, and his confirmation of one was required. (Much like the Asante kingdom). Oyo authority was expressed in a form of indirect rule by the stationing all over the empire of resident political representatives known as ajele – asoju oba (the eyes of the king) – who in turn were supervised by the ilari, the royal messengers from Oyo (Smith, 1969; p.45).

For example, in the Ijebu kingdom there were three main councils, occasionally overlapping in membership. The highest, the Ilamuren, consisting of the great magnates and officials under the presidency of the Olisa, discharged legislative, executive, and judicial functions relating to the whole kingdom. Next came the Osugbo under the dispensing of justice, and then the Pampa, composed of the younger men and overseeing administration and warfare.

The government of a Yoruba kingdom and its capital thus presents a complex and somewhat confusing picture, mainly because of the fusion of political, judicial and religious concepts and the division of responsibilities. Even in so small a kingdom as Ikerre (in Ekiti), for example, the Government exhibited this Byzantine quality; there were two groups of leading chiefs, each divided into three grades, and four main councils: the Iyare Mefa, or inner council, meeting daily; the Ajo Iyare, meeting every 8 days to discuss town affairs; the Ajagun, or war council, and the Ajo Ilu, or general council of the town held four times yearly. Yet, in practice all seems to have worked smoothly enough in these delicately balanced governments, except when some external pressure or crisis intervened to overthrow the slow and deliberate processes of the constitution.

Naturally each kingdom developed different mechanism for dealing with its individual problems, so that it would be futile to postulate any "model" constitution for a Yoruba kingdom. On the other hand, with the notable exception of the new states of the 19th century, the main features of government – the town, the sacred oba at its center, the hierarchy of hereditary chiefs and priests with their jealously guarded responsibilities — remained constant.

This form of government was not confined to the capital, but was repeated throughout the kingdom, every town forming a microcosm of the central government. The place of the crowned oba was taken by a less ruler, generally entitled to wear only a simple crown or coronet (called akoro in Oyo) or a cap of office. Usually these rulers were chosen like the greater oba by kingmakers from royal houses and presented for approval to the oba of the kingdom, while in some cases the latter nominated the provincial rulers (Smith, 1969; p.117). Today, obas are still removed from office for non-performance. Consider the case of Oba Samuel Aderiyi Adara of the Ode-Ekiti community of Ekiti State in Nigeria, who was dethroned for non-performance: The traditional ruler, who is a born again Christian, was accused of not contributing enough to the progress of the community and of frustrating the celebration of the yearly festival. The monarch was equally blamed for the deaths of some notable indigenes, including four professors, one of them a former don of the University of Ado-Ekiti.

The traditional ruler was invited to the community meeting where he was accused of failing in his duty of moving the town forward. But attempts by the monarch to extricate himself from the allegations failed when he was asked to mention his personal contribution to the growth of the town since he became the king. He was lambasted for not informing the state government of the pathetic socio-economic situation in his domain and asked to vacate the throne for a more

progressive minded personality in the town. While the meeting was still going on, some youths in the town invaded the venue, removed the dress of the traditional ruler, including his royal beads and crown, and chased him out of the town. Shortly after, traditional trees in strategic shrines were cut down, symbolizing the demise of the Oba. The spokesman for the community said it was the collective decision of both the old and young to dethrone the monarch, saying his reign was "disastrous, woeful and sorrowful" (The Guardian, July 24, 2003; p.4).

To the outsider, this system of government may be "Byzantine" which was the typical reaction of many foreigners to the indigenous African systems. Though traditional African societies might have appeared "chaotic," there was order. In African philosophical scheme, there was perfect harmony among the seemingly anarchic and unrelated events in a giant natural equation. The king's role was to preserve the harmony. Perhaps the closest modern-day analogy is a jazz quartet. Separately, each plays "horribly." The guitarist seems to be "way off on a discordant tangent." The trombonist is "blowing his head off." The drummer seems to be "summoning the devil" and the cymbalist is "creating confusion." But when all this "confusion" is synthesized or fused, out comes some beautiful music. To the untrained ear, jazz music is simply "total confusion." The African king's role may be likened to that of a synthesizer or conductor — to produce harmonic music out of the confusion.

Similarly, the components of indigenous African systems may seem "Byzantine," but together with the others, they may produce "beautiful music." Indeed, Smith (1969), perhaps inadvertently, reached this conclusion: "Despite its hierarchical character, Yoruba society was in practice surprisingly democratic" (p.118).

Additionally, there were striking similarities between the Yoruba and other governmental systems. For example, the powers of the Zulu king, like the Alafin, were similarly curtailed. He was powerless without the izikhulu, an inner council made up of the chiefs of preShakan chiefdoms. He could not take any decision without them. Both the Oyo and Zulu kingdoms instituted checks against royal absolutism. Both also assimilated preexisting ethnic groups. But there were slight differences however. While the Zulu kingdom was centralized, the Oyo empire was a confederation of smaller autonomous kingdoms, all of which traced their ancestry to Oduduwa.

References and further reading

Oshoma Imoagene. (1990). The Yoruba of S.Western Nigeria. *Know Your Country Series: Handbook of Nigeria's Major Culture Areas*. Vol. 2. New-Era Publishers. Ibadan.
Ayittey, George B,N. (2006). Indigenous African Institutions. Ardsley-on-Hudson, NY: Transnational Publishers.
Boahen, A.A. and J.B. Webster (1970). History of West Africa. New York: Praeger.
Olaniyan, Richard ed. (1985).Nigerian History and Culture. London: Longman Group Limited.
Smith, Robert S. (1969). Kingdoms of The Yoruba. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
Stride G.T. and Ifeka Caroline (1971). Peoples and Empires of West Africa. Lagos: Thomas Nelson.