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The Historical Origin and Socio-Cultural Dynamics of the Yoruba Speaking People of Nigeria Olayiwola Enoch, Oke ,PhD

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Abstract

The Yoruba are one of the most prominent ethnic groups in Nigeria with history stretching over a thousand years of cultural, economic, and political achievements. Despite the impact on Nigerian society, little have been done to explore the social cultural history the Yoruba people. This study therefore delves into the fascinating history of the Yoruba people from Ile-Ife to the migration, socio-political and cultural development. Despite, modernity caused by the introduction of Islam and Christianity and later colonialism, the Yoruba people significantly retain their identity which make them stand out amongst the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. However, to unveil this rich heritage, the study adopts a qualitative research design which incorporates in-depth interviews with Yoruba elders, trained historians in Yoruba History, traditionalist, chiefs, analysis of archival records, and a thorough review of existing literature. The study traces the Yoruba's origins back to ancient times, their system of governance, ancient socio-cultural practices and their significant contributions to Nigerian culture, economy, and politics. The findings also highlight the resilience shown by the Yoruba in the face of colonialism, slavery, and other external challenges. This study contributes significantly to our understanding of the rich history and cultural heritage of the Yoruba. This research has implications for historians and cultural preservationists, Yoruba people, Africans in Diaspora, tourists cultural enthusiasts, and policymakers and educators to form culturally relevant education curricula.

Keywords: Yoruba History, Oral Traditions, Religious Beliefs, Socio-Political Traditions, Cultural Identities, Colonialism

Introduction

The Yoruba people occupy a large area in the southwestern part of Nigeria and some parts in the Republic of Benin and Togoland, with their influence spreading beyond the lower Niger northwards into Nupeland.¹ In contemporary, the Yoruba are in Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Lagos, Ekiti, Osun states with a sizeable percentage of Yoruba population in kwara state. Meanwhile, the history of the Yorubas is one of the most compelling narratives in African history, interwoven with myth, oral traditions, and documented events. With a history that dates to the ancient civilizations of the Nile Valley, the Yoruba have developed a unique culture shaped by their origins, traditions and interaction with other cultures. They have at various due to their large numbers, significantly influenced African culture, politics, religion, and economics which extended far beyond their geographical boundaries. They have through oral traditions and myths, such as the centrality of Ile-Ife as their mythical origin, provided unique insights into their worldview and values, demonstrating a balanced integration of spirituality and pragmatism.² This strong sense of identity and cultural heritage maintained by the Yoruba people is reflected in their language, customs, traditions and arts coupled with

archaeological findings and historical records corroborated their advanced societal organization, intricate political systems, and economic achievements.³

However, to understand the Yoruba's history requires a nuanced exploration of their indigenous narratives alongside external influences. From their mythological beginnings in Ile-Ife, the expansion and establishment of flourishing kingdoms and inter-group relations to their engagement with the European traders during the transatlantic slave trade and eventual encounter with colonizers, the Yoruba navigated complex historical dynamics that shaped their identity. The Yoruba people passed through phases of advancement and retrogression notwithstanding, their adaptability and resilience were evident in the evolution of their unique governance structures, religious and cultural practices, and artistic expressions.⁴ Meanwhile, Yoruba's contributions to the understanding of the broader African history can not be overemphasised as it showcased, their role in shaping the continent's cultural and economic landscapes. The Yoruba influence extends into the America (South America) and other countries like Brasil, Cuba, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia amongst others, where the transatlantic slave trade disseminated their cultural heritage, significantly impacting global cultures.⁵

Thus, a critical examination of the history of the Yoruba fosters a deeper understanding of their enduring legacy and their ability to maintain cultural continuity while embracing change offers valuable lessons in resilience and identity in an ever-evolving world. Through this study, the development, practice and the richness of Yoruba heritage passed down from one generation to the other is brought into focus with it critical relevance to both African and global histories.

Origins and Early History of the Yoruba

The origins of the Yoruba people is entrenched in a fusion of mythological narratives and historical events that showed their spiritual and cultural foundation. At the core of these narratives was the city of Ile-Ife, revered as the birthplace of Yoruba civilization. Ile-Ife was referred to as *Ile onuro, Ile-Ife Oodiaye nibiti ojumo tin mowa* which is translated as - the dawn where the work of creation took place, where the dawn of the day was first experienced and the head or nucleus of the whole universe.⁶ Idowu .E.B explained the importance of Ile -Ife in the emergence of Yoruba race as:

the home of all things: the place from which the day dawns: the enchanted holy city: the home of divinities and mysterious spirits It is the heart which sets the blood coursing through their (Yoruba) national veins.⁷

Historically, the Yoruba were thought to have emerged as a distinct ethnic group in West Africa around the first millennium. Archaeological evidence, particularly from sites like Ile-Ife, suggests a sophisticated society with advanced urban planning, vibrant artistic traditions, and a thriving economy rooted in agriculture and trade. This period also saw the influence of the Nok culture, which predates the Yoruba but is considered an important precursor in shaping the Yoruba's art and metallurgy, especially the renowned bronze and terracotta works found in Ile-Ife.⁸ The archaeological findings in Ile-Ife like *Ori Olokun*, discovered by Leo Frobenius a German and the 21 bronze heads discovered at *Wumoniye* Compound⁹ offered a window into the advanced craftsmanship and cultural depth of the

Yoruba people. The intricate sculptures and artifacts uncovered in the region from 12th to 15th century A.D highlighted the Yoruba's artistic achievements and gave a significant insight into their societal organization, religious practices, and worldview. These findings reinforced the connection between mythology and historical evidence, showing how deeply entwined the Yoruba's spiritual beliefs were with their material culture ⁹

Trade and migration played a key role in the shaping of the Yoruba's early history. Through interactions with neighboring groups and the establishment of trade networks, the Yoruba were exposed to a variety of cultural influences that enriched their traditions. For instance, Yoruba communities engaged in high-level trade interactions with the Hausa, who were known for their long distance trading. The Hausa traders travelled south to the old Oyo Kingdom, where they exchanged goods, such as hides and skins, bones, potash, cattle, horses and leather products for kola nuts and various agricultural produce from the Yoruba communities. These exchanges enhanced the Yoruba's artistic and cultural expressions, demonstrating how external influences and indigenous developments worked together to form the foundation of their civilization¹⁰. Additionally, the Yoruba's strong connection to their environment is evident in their early reliance on agriculture, which formed the backbone of their economy. Their ability to harness natural resources and establish sustainable agricultural practices contributed significantly to their societal stability and growth. This economic foundation created the necessary conditions for the development of complex political structures and cultural traditions. ¹¹ Therefore, the early history of the Yoruba represents a dynamic interplay of mythology, environmental adaptation, and cultural exchange, laying the groundwork for the flourishing of Yoruba civilization in the centuries that followed.

The Political Structure of the Yoruba States

The political system of the Yoruba people was decentralized, consisting of a network of city-states, each with its own monarch, known as the *Oba*. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the different kindgoms in Yorubaland were grouped into several sub-cultural divisions¹² and later towns with an *oba* as the political head. Prominent among these city-states were Oyo, Ile-Ife, Ijebu, Ekiti, Egba, Egbado, Ijesha, Ondo and Akoko. Though, they shared common cultural and religious traditions, each state operated independently, with its own political structures and occasionally engaging in both alliances and conflicts.¹³ For smooth administration, each *oba* in Yorubaland have supporting chiefs who advised him on various issues, ¹⁴ with some assigned to perform specific roles.

Ile-Ife, as the spiritual and cultural heart of the Yoruba people, held a position of symbolic authority over other Yoruba states. Its monarch, the Ooni of Ile-Ife, held one of the most revered and important traditional titles in Yorubaland. His position as the spiritual leader of the Yoruba, emphasised the central role of the city in the broader Yoruba cosmology and cultural identity¹⁵. Moreover, the Ooni of Ile-Ife was regarded as the custodian of Yoruba history, traditions, and religious practices who preserve and promote Yoruba cultural heritage. Though, not a political leader in terms of commanding large armies like the Alafin of Oyo, notwithstanding he held moral and ancestral positions over other Yoruba rulers, serving as a symbol of unity among Yoruba kingdoms. This elevated status of the Ooni of Ife explained the importance of Ile-Ife as not just a political center in Yorubaland but as a place of divine significance.

The Oyo Empire, however, rose to prominence as the most politically dominant Yoruba state. The empire was regarded as the most powerful and largest Yoruba kingdoms believed to have been founded by Oranyan, one of the grandsons of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba race. Oranyan, after his brief sojourn in Benin Empire moved north-west of Ile-Ife to establish a kingdom, about thirty miles away from River Niger and very close to Nupe and Borgu and named the place Oyo Ile, that eventually became the capital of Oyo Empire.¹⁶ Before his death, he had established a monarchical system of government modeled after the one practiced by Oduduwa in Ile-Ife with the *Alafin* as the paramount ruler. The governance structure in Oyo featured a sophisticated system of checks and balances. At the helm was the Alaafin of Oyo, the political leader, who was supported by the *Oyomesi*, a council of Chiefs that acted as advisers to the 'Oba' on day-to-day activities of the government and at the same counterbalance to his powers. This system illustrated the Yoruba emphasis on consultation and consensus in governance, ensuring that leadership was not despotic and absolute but was rather subject to communal deliberation.¹⁷

In contrast, other kindgdoms that emerged after the collapse of Oyo Empire in 19th century, like the Ijebu and Ekiti kingdoms developed less centralized political systems, influenced by local traditions and the geographical situation of these regions. The Ijebu kingdom, which is situated present day Ogun State in South western Nigeria, claimed to be the descendants of Obanta, known for economic acumen with robust trading networks and unique political structure which played an essential role in their influence and governance. The Ekiti tribe, meanwhile, were characterized by their focus on communal governance and grassroots participation, where decisions were made through consultation among the community members, reinforcing the democratic nature of Yoruba governance.¹⁸

Despite, the presence of an *Oba* in Ijebu and Ekiti kingdoms there were the existence of chiefs who held their position in trust for the people. The chiefs would not act on their own but were the representatives of the people who were expected to brief their subject's outcome of any *Igbimo agba meeting*. Through the same channel, the people often express their wishes, when necessary to the chiefs who in turn served as the people's mouthpiece to the *igbimo* and ultimately to the *Oba*. Therefore, across the Yoruba states, there was a strong emphasis on representation and accountability. Decisions at the community level were often made through deliberative councils, ensuring that diverse perspectives were included in governance. This participatory approach reflects the Yoruba commitment to a more inclusive and equitable political system, highlighting societal harmony as a fundamental value.²⁰

The interactions between these city-states, marked by both alliances and rivalries, created a dynamic political landscape that contributed to the richness of Yoruba history. These relationships, although often competitive, fostered a sense of interconnectedness and mutual influence among the Yoruba people, enriching their political and cultural development.²¹

Religious and Cultural Traditions

Religion is central to the formation of Yoruba identity which link the physical and spiritual realms worlds. This is contrary to the perception of the foreign investigators, who asserted that the Yoruba people like any other African tribes did not have religion or belief in high God. The Eurocentric lens labelled indigeneous practices as superstitious, idolatrous

or even demonic. They used derogative words like paganism, polythesism because of the presence of many gods to describe the African religion. This is far from the truth though, central to Yoruba religion is a pantheon of deities²² known as *Orishas*, notwithstanding the Yoruba belief in the existence of a Supreme Being and that each of the deities governs specific aspects of life and nature. To the Yoruba people, the Supreme Being, *Olodumare*, created the universe and sustains all life. According to Awolalu and Dopamu, the word *Olodumare* is divided into three parts which are *Olu-* meaning “the owner of”, *Odu-* “Chief head” or “very full” and *Ma re* which also translates to that “which does not go”. Thus, going by these three words *Olodumare* to the Yoruba means the owner of the universe. Hence, the attribute of referring to the Supreme Being as- *Oyigiyigi Oba aiku* – the mighty, durable, immovable rock that never dies.²³ There are other local names that are given to God by the Yoruba such as *Olorun-* “the owner of heaven”, *Orise-* “the source from which beings originate” and “*Olofin orun-* the king of heaven.”

Deities/Divinities

Meanwhile, the Yoruba cosmological framework is centered on a pantheon of deities known as *orishas*, who represents various natural elements and moral principles. In Yorubaland, deities are gods with small letter “g” that serve as intermediaries between *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) and mortals. Each of the *orisha* are created by the Supreme Being for a specific reason and to serve ‘His’ will in the theoretical government of the world.²⁴ The major *Orisha* in Yorubaland and the roles assigned to them by *Olodumare* include: *Obatala*, also known as *Orisa nla* (creator of human bodies and *Orisha* of wisdom, purity and peace), *Oduduma* (founder of the Yoruba people: associated with kingship and earth), *Orunmila* (god of wisdom and divination), *Sango* (god of thunder, lightning, fire and justice deified king of Oyo), and *Osun* (goddess of love, beauty, fertility, diplomacy and rivers), *Ogun* (god of iron, war and technology), *Eshu* (messenger of the god; cross roads and enforcer), *Oya* (god of wind, storm, transformation and the cementary *Sopono* (god that manifests the wrath of God) and host of others that oversee various domains of human existence.²⁵

Rituals Practices

Furthermore, Yoruba religious life is deeply enriched by rituals, festivals, and ceremonies, which were fundamental in maintaining communal harmony and deepening spiritual engagement. The Yoruba people offers sacrifices and rituals for several reasons. These practices often involve ancestral veneration, serving to honor the past and ensure the well-being of the community. Sacrifices known as *ebo* are ways to communicate with the spiritual forces, express gratitude for favour or protection from evil or to make further request for same, healing, success peace and childbirth. *Moreso*, sacrifices is a medium used by the Yorubas to maintain balance between spiritual and physical realms to avoid calamities through sickness, misfortune, conflict, famine, drought and barrenness, untimely death and wars. Most importantly, sacrifices are offered by the Yoruba to appease the gods on the outcome of *ifa* divination to address a particular spiritual issue.

Festival Traditions

Festival and celebrations are common phenomenon among the Yoruba tribe as it resonates their religious beliefs, social aspect and values. The celebrations are held annually at a particular time of the year to serve both the spiritual and earthly purpose and dedicated to particular *orisa* (deities). Like the sacrifices, festivals are held in honour of the deities to show appreciation for the blessings and guidance of the past years at the same time make additional demands for good health and good things of life for the coming year.²⁶ Meanwhile, some festivals are held to commemorate an important historical events that occurred in the past like migration, safe from affliction, untouched by plague and scarcity, rescued from war ruins, to mark the end of bountiful farm harvest, rites of passage, initiation, communal gathering entertainment and recreation. Thus, festivals like the *Osun*, which honors Osun River goddess for her benevolence, *Oya*, the goddess of River Niger who was the first and the beloved wife of *Sango*,²⁷ *Sango*, the god of thunder and lighetenning, *Esu*, *Ayelala*, *Sopona* amongst others. All these exemplify the cultural richness and religious devotion of the Yoruba people.²⁸

Artistic Impression

Artistic expression is closely tied to religious practices within Yoruba culture serving as means of religious worship and cultural identity. It is an aspect of the Yoruba culture that contribute to the development, preservation of the Yoruba worldview and values. The Yoruba people are entrenched in rich and multiple forms of art, which includes visual, verbal and performance arts which are symboblic serving amongst others social, spiritual and educational purpose. Sculptures like wooden carvings, bronze works, and terra cotta which most at times depict deities, royalty and ancestors, beadwork and textiles like *Aso oke* and *Adire*, beaded crown pottery and calabash decoration and other forms of art serve not only creative purposes but a pragmatic force that shapes, maintains and sustains the Yoruba culture. The famous bronze and terracotta sculptures of Ile-Ife are prime examples of this artistic integration, reflecting both religious devotion and cultural sophistication.²⁹ This reflects that the Yoruba people have the wherewithal to produce hings that helped them to be acquainted to their environment.

Songs and Dance

Songs and dance hold a very important place in Yoruba culture, serving both religious and social responsibilities. The Yoruba people like the other Nigerian tribes are found of singing and have a very veritable flood of songs enriching their heritage and function as a strong means of passing messages across. Songs and dances manifest in everyday life of the people, including religious worship, naming ceremonies, wedding, burial, cultivating the farm, going to the stream, wars, praising the rulers, comforting babies, telling the stories of the past rulers, expressing joys and sorrows other daily activities. There are different songs that are associated with different activities in Yorubaland hence the popular saying that, *a ki korin oku ni bi igbeyawo*.³⁰ (You don't sing funeral song at a wedding place). Songs in Yoruba culture can be classified into different types, such as: *orin orisha* (songs for the deities), *Orin ikomojade* (songs for naming ceremony) *orin isinku* (funeral or dirge songs), *orin Ijewadi* (songs for initiation), *Oriki* (praise songs), *orin ogun* (war song), *Ijala ode* (songs by the hunters, *orin idaraya* (folk songs), *orin ife* (love songs) *orin eebu* (satirical songs), *orin egungun* (songs for masquarade). The Yoruba

songs are not only for entertainment, but a living archive of the people's tradition and information which are passed down from one generation to the other.

Drum Performance and Dance Expression

Since songs alone will not have the desired impact, drumming is introduced to create diverse rhythms and allow people to dance to almost any song except *orin aro* (dirge or mourning song). Dance is important in worship and rituals, used to invoke spirit and play an important role during naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals and community celebrations. Drumming plays a key role in ceremonies, communication, and storytelling. Drumming is used to announce events and convey messages, praise or criticize individuals, mark transition and energize dance and performance. Prominent among the Yoruba drums, though depending on the area are: *Dundun* (talking drum) which is used to speak proverbs, praise names and messages, *Bata* drums associated with Sango deity and used during the religious rituals for the *Orisha*, *gangan* (small talking drum) used in both praise singing and political oratory.³¹ These musical forms reinforce communal bonds, help preserve traditions, and communicate messages across generations.³² Moreso, Yoruba drummers are historians, praise singers and custodians of oral traditions.

Myth, Proverbs and Folktales.

Yoruba oral traditions, such as myths, proverbs, and folktales, were crucial to the cultural identity of the people. Myth which had its origin from the Greek word *muthos*³³ is the information about the past that are passed down by the word of mouth. The Yorubas used myth to pass their history of origin, the migration story and most importantly the past events, which are kept in memory. The Yoruba are very rich in witty sayings, proverbs, adages, epigrams, riddles and witty sayings which are derived from daily experiences and what happened in the past. Thus, most of their religion practices, beliefs and ways of life are learnt from this. For instance, proverbs- which are witty sayings- are often used among the Yoruba people to settle disputes, quarrel, and teach morals, warn against impending calamities, criticise, indict people, consolation, express the inevitability of certain event to preserve culture and for spiritual and religious use. Meanwhile, these narratives not only convey moral lessons but also convey historical understanding and philosophical insights. Through oral storytelling and proverbs the Yoruba ensure the continuity of their heritage, passing down wisdom from one generation to the next.³⁴

Taboos

Taboo which is called *eevo* in Yoruba parlance is a religious prohibition against a certain behaviour or discussion. It is used by the Yoruba as a social norm that disallow people from behaving in a way that is inimical to the sacred, unclean, harmful or offensive to the gods, ancestors or the moral value of the community. The Yoruba hold a strong belief in *Olodumare*, the supreme deity, who is regarded as the source of moral order, having inscribed the principles of right and wrong in the hearts of individuals. Moreso, the action taken by one person in the society, can affect others in either positive or negative ways. To prevent people from becoming rebellious or lawless, society establish codes of conduct – to regulate the activities of the people. There are certain set norms that should be observed and if done

sincerely will bring development and progress to such communities and if otherwise will bring calamity not only to the person who have done wrong but the community at large. As Yorubaland has deluge of deities, each one of them has one or two norms that should be observed by their worshippers. Awoyelu and pointed out that:

“among the worshippers of *Orisha nla* . the arch-divinity, must not drink palmwine because *Orisha nla* forbids it while the worshippers of *Ogun* may drink as much palmwine as they like without offending the god”

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Consequently, taboos in Yoruba are used to teach morality that are important in maintaining Yoruba religious life, anchored in respect for elders and community harmony. For examples : disrespecting elders or calling them by name is consider a character flaws with a consequence of social rejection, whilsting at night which the people believed to attract evil spirits or snakes, using a left hand to give out something which is seen as a deep insult especially to elders, beating a man with broom is forbidden as it may attract bad luck and forbidden of some foods like dog, catfish or pork by some families which may results in sickness or misfortune among others. Therefore, to the Yoruba's the relevance of taboo's can not be overemphasised because it protect the people from social harm, serves as a compass to make sure traditional norms and customs are upheld, regulate the attitude of individual to prevent disorderliness and conflict, teach control and morality, protect natural resources, promote the sense of identity, promote traditional health practices, respect for elders and constituted authorities.

Egungun (Masquerade) Festivals.

Egungun which literally mean masquerade among the Yoruba's is centered on honouring ancestors and connecting the dead with the living. *Egungun* is referred to as an ancestral spirit of the deceased who had come from heaven to visit and check the well being of the people and at the same time influence the lives of their descendants. Hence, they are referred to as *Ara orun*- “The citizen of heaven”³⁶. In Yorubaland, notable examples of *egungun* include *Olokun*, *Alare*, *Elewe*, *Onilu*, *Oje*, *Papa*, *Oloolu*, *Ajimuda*, *paraka*, *Erinle*, *Eriru*, *Atele* depending on the area. The masquerader wears elaborate and colourful mask with a net covering his face, which gives the idea that the wearer is from the spirit world. In many Yoruba communities *egungun* Festival is usually held annually and lasted for a week with music, chants, dance and public displays by the masquerades at the center shrine in day light, escorted by *eesarun* or *aba eegun* depending on the area. Some masquerades carry whip while others don't, but one unique thing is that *egungun* usually dance to the admiration of the people at a particular spot in the town.

Women and those who are not from the masquerade lineage are not allowed to know the secret of *egungun* and are forbidden from touching or seeing them during specific rituals. It is also considered dangerous to remove the costumes as it can bring spiritual consequences. Apart from the annual festivals, *Egungun* play a major role during funeral ceremonies of their family members. In such occasions, they enter the house of the deceased to initiate the spirit for the transmission to the great beyond. In some lineages where the deceased had strong masquerade ties, specific masquerades are carried out in their honour even when not yet the time for the festival, to formally guide them to the spiritual world.³⁷

External influence on Yoruba Socio-cultural Traditions.

The Yoruba have from the onset, possessed a unique and rich cultural heritage that guides their way of life, regulates social conduct, upholds law and order, and fosters peaceful co-existence. However, external influences such as the introduction of Islam, Christianity and colonial rule significantly altered many of their traditional practices.

Islam

Islam was introduced to Yorubaland through the trans-Saharan trade between 14th-16th centuries, a trade route that connected West Africa to North African including Islamic regions like Morocco and Egypt. Prominent among the West Africa tribes that participated in this commerce were the Hausas, Kanuri's and the Tuaregs. Meanwhile, Islam spread to these towns through the Sahelian states (Mali, Songhai Kanem Bornu Empires), where the religion became a state religion and from there spread southwards including the Yorubaland. The Yoruba people did not have direct contact with the Arab traders due to its geographical locations, but through the Northern intermediaries like the Hausas who they maintained trade ties with through towns like Ilorin, Borgu, Oyo and Igboho. Thus, Muslim clerics (Mallams) and traders settled in Yoruba towns where they establish Islamic schools (Madrass) and mosques where indigenes were converted to the new religion. However, Islam began to have strong footing in Yorubaland after the launch of the Fulani Jihad of 1804 when the muslim communities in west Africa made efforts to revitalise the the religion of Islam.³⁸ However, by the 19th century, the Fulani Jihad made an in road to Ilorin which became an emirate under the sokoto caliphate. It was therefore, from Ilorin that Islamic religion spread to Yoruba towns like Ede, Iwo, Ibadan and Oshogbo.

The religion impacted the socio-cultural life of the Yoruba people because they started to embrace Islam which introduced new religious ideas, practices and education systems against the former traditional practices. The religion influenced the social ways of life which is noticeable in the mode of dressing like the use of turbans, flowing gowns *hijab*, names are changed to reflect the new religion with architecture (mosques), praying five times in a day while the Islamic laws replaced the traditional laws. Most importantly, the incursion of Islam to Yorubaland through Ilorin that precipitated political tensions like the Afonja revolts against the Alafin. This no doubt led to the fall of Oyo Empire and several wars fought in Yorubaland in the 19th century as many vassal states under Oyo Kingdom sought assert their independence.

Christianity

Christianity made an inroad to Yorubaland after the abolition of slave trade when various missionary groups began to make their way to Nigeria.³⁸ This was as a result of a new religious and moral awakening which began to sweep through the protestant countries of Europe and America, popular known as the Evangel Movement, that was very popular in Britain.³⁹ However, efforts to christianise Yoruba people began in 1841 by the Christian Missionaries Society led by Reverend J.F. Schoon, who was accompanied by Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a freed slave of Yoruba descent from Sierra Leone. By 1846, Henry Townsend established a resident mission at Abeokuta where christianity expanded to other Yoruba towns like Lagos (1852), Ibadan (1853) and Oyo (1856). The activities of C.M.S was followed by the

missionaries' activities of the Methodist Mission, led by Thomas Birch Freeman in Abeokuta and Badagry, the Baptist Mission led by Thomas Jafferson in Ijaiye in 1852 and Ogbomoso in 1882, and the Seventh Day-Adventist Mission in Erunmu and Sao in 1914 and Ipoti Ekiti in 1915 respectively.⁴⁰

Though, the introduction of Christianity have positive impacts on the Yorubaland people in the areas of education, development of Yoruba language and the emergence of Yoruba educated elites who became useful in colonial administration and early nationalist leaders who laid the foundation for the movement that ended colonialism. However, the influence of Christian missionaries brought in a new era into Yorubaland with the disruptions of some long-standing traditions while offering new forms of identity and social mobility. One of the most important changes was marriage and family life where monogamy was promoted against the traditional practices of polygamy. This new concept changed the social household dynamics and redefined marital roles. Moreover, traditional practices like rituals, festivals ancestral worship were labelled as pagan which made the people to start to jettison the practices. Missionaries also brought changes in the mode of dressing and appearance as the traditional dress was replaced with European style clothing.

Colonialism

The Yoruba people first encountered European traders and missionaries in the 15th century, when Portuguese explorers established trading posts along the West African coast. By the 19th century, British colonial interests began to encroach upon Yoruba territories under the guise of trade, anti-slavery missions and missionary activities. The unusual visit that began as a Childs play at the beginning⁴¹ led to tensions and conflicts that culminated in the eventual colonization of Yorubalands. The annexation of Lagos and the treaty signed by Oba Dosunmu ceded Lagos to the British crown⁴² marking the beginning of the British direct control which later expanded into the hinterlands. Treaties were signed, at times under duress with Yoruba leaders in Ijebuland, Epe, Oyo, Egba, Remo, Ekiti and hoist of others thereby progressively leading to the imposition of British colonial rules. Thus, by 1900s, Yorubaland had been enraptured into the Southern protectorate with the adoption of system of indirect rule.

Colonialism impacted greatly on the socio-cultural development of the Yoruba people because, it changed the existing traditional political structures with the obas who were hitherto de-factor were subjected to whim and caprices of the colonial masters. Moreover, the traditional economy paved way for cash crops productions like cocoa, palm oil, groundnut, Kolanut and others to satisfy the British economic interest thereby promoting the people to depend on them. Though, the British introduced built infrastructure, introduced western education and a new legal system, however these were embarked upon to satisfy the British selfish economic interest. Overall, colonialism destabilized traditional systems, creating class division and tension among the people.

Continuity

Despite, these external pressures and disruptions caused by the introduction of Christianity, Islam and colonialism, the Yoruba people demonstrated extraordinary endurance and malleability. The Yoruba's ability to preserve and continue practicing their indigenous

religious beliefs and cultural expressions during the colonial era is a testament to their tenacity. Despite attempts by colonial authorities to suppress these traditions, Yoruba culture endured, adapting and evolving in the face of external forces⁴² Rather than forsaking their traditional religion and beliefs, the Yoruba integrated elements of their traditions in the new religion practices. Colonial rule affected the traditional kingship and governance system in Yorubaland through the system of indirect rule, still Yoruba retained strong allegiance to their traditional institutions as the monarchical systems remained in practice in the entire Yorubaland.

The Yoruba faced pressures to abandon traditional practices because to them it was outdated and *uncivilized*. There was an onslaught from western education, urbanisation, and modernity on the people to jettison traditional norms and practices. Still, Yoruba language, fashion like the use of *ofe-aso oke* festivals like the *oro* and *agemo* festivals among the Ijebu people, *Osun-Osogbo*, *Ogun* festivals are still been celebrated annually to mark bountiful harvest, *Olojo* festival in Ile-Ife, *Eyo* festival in Lagos, *Egungun* festivals in various Yoruba towns like the *Oloolu* in Ibadan, *Alapansapa*, *Oje*, *Aje Ijero*, *Atele* and *Eriru* in Ipoti-Ekiti Ipoti and *ajimuda*, *Sango* festival in Oyo town, *Oranmiyan* and *Obatala* in Ile-Ife in Ile-Ife remain vibrant till date. Traditional practices such as pouring of libations, naming and burial ceremonies, ancestral worship, divination, chanting of incantations, proverbs, folklore, drumming, initiation, dance, songs are still important to the Yoruba socio-cultural life and identity. Indeed, Yoruba in diaspora in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Oyotunji in North Carolina in America retain Yoruba traditions practices.

The introduction of Western education by the missionaries played a prominent role in promoting Yoruba elites. While the colonial administration used education to further its own agenda, it also empowered a new generation of educated Yoruba elites who were instrumental in the fight for independence. The Yoruba embraced education as both a tool for resistance and a means of societal progress.⁴³ Prominent leaders like Herbert Macaulay and Obafemi Awolowo emerged as key figures in the struggle for Nigerian independence, advocating for Yoruba self-governance and the preservation of cultural traditions in a rapidly changing world⁴⁴ Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a former slave became influential Christian Missionary and linguist who developed Yoruba language, sir Ademola Adetokunbo became the first Chief Judge of Nigeria 1958-1972. Likewise, Yoruba women like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti who emerged as champions of women's rights and economic empowerment, contributing to the broader movement for independence. Their activism highlighted the intersection of gender and resistance in Yoruba society, challenging colonial and patriarchal structures.⁴⁵

The eventual independence of Nigeria in 1960 marked the culmination of decades of Yoruba resistance and advocacy. The Yoruba played a central role in shaping Nigeria's independence movement, demonstrating their unwavering commitment to self-determination, cultural preservation, and political autonomy.⁴⁵ Thus, the Yoruba response to external influence has been a selective adaptation and cultural preservation which has blended continuity and change made sure that the Yoruba people remain culturally steadfast, rich and well placed in Africa and the world generally.

Conclusion

The evolution of Yoruba people history showed a significant interaction between indigenous traditions and external influences, defined by a long history of socio-political change. Overtime, the Yoruba have developed a unique civilization marked by sophisticated governance systems, religious pluralism, dynamic artistic traditions, and enduring communal values. However, the introduction of Islam, Christianity, and colonialism caused destruction in many aspects to the cultural, political, and religious traditions of the people. Despite the encounter, the Yoruba exhibited remarkable cultural adaptability and resistance which allowed them to retain the major aspects of their identity while incorporating elements of foreign systems in ways that reinforced, rather than replaced, indigenous frame works. Thus, despite the change, continuity remains evident in ritual practices, oral traditions, language, kinship systems, while religious syncretism continue to function as foundational pillars of identity. The ability to withstand the external influence by the Yoruba prove that their culture is not subsumed or lost, rather it continued to spe their history. Finally, the Yoruba experience shows a more general pattern in African Settings- the ability to deal with external influences while at the same time still holding tenanciously to their own cultural distinctiveness. This attests to how strong indigeneous African institutions have stood the test of time, even when confronted with globalhistorical changes.

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