

Creation Stories and History of State Foundation: A Re-assessment of Yoruba Myth and Legend of Creation

Adebisi David, ALADE

Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University
Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.
+2348064151074 and +2348024615670
Email: aladeadebisidavid@yahoo.com

Abstract: There are different schools of thought about the origin of the Yoruba people but all relate to the same ancestor 'Oduduwa'. One story has it that he migrated from Mecca because of his belief in deities, which caused him to be expelled from his abode, and then came to settle in Ile-Ife and start a dynasty, which was further expanded by his seven sons. Another school of thought has it that he was an ordinary Yoruba man who came to power by overthrowing the existing ruling class while other stories has it that Oduduwa was sent by God from heaven to create the earth and the human race. He descended from heaven accompanied by his lieutenants and landed at Ile-Ife, with a handful of sand and a cock in his hands, he spread the sand over the earth, which was covered with water, and the cock spread the sand all over the earth and created land. Most of these uncoordinated conflicting stories were very difficult to prove or be binding on history for any academic mind. Despite efforts by scholars of Yoruba tradition to produce facts adequate to support with absolute certainty on accurate analysis of the Yoruba origin, little had been known. I believe that history should not be made to depend only on myths and legends as determinants but on reality not besmeared with false notions from false consciousness. Using historical analytical methodology, the paper plunges into variances of stories of origin and state formation in Yorubaland.

[Adebisi David, ALADE. **Creation Stories and History of State Foundation: A Re-assessment of Yoruba Myth and Legend of Creation.** *Researcher* 2015;7(3):61-65]. (ISSN: 1553-9865). <http://www.sciencepub.net/researcher>. 10

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

Introduction

The territory now inhabited by the Yoruba tribes is bounded on the west by Dahomi, on the south-west by Porto Novo and Apapa, on the south by the sea, on the east by Benin, and on the north by the Mohammedan tribes from the interior, who have within recent times conquered and annexed the Yoruba province of Ilorin¹. It would seem that the time of emergence of the Yoruba could be placed in the late Stone Age in West Africa history. Their historical consciousness started at Ile-Ife which is regarded as their common point of origin and centre of political gravity. There exist basically three accounts of origin of the Yoruba. The first is the creation myth which throws Ile-Ife up as the centre of creation of the universe, thus attracting the expression; Ife o'ndaye, ibi ojumo ti mo wa (meaning *Ife, the point of creation where the day dawns.*)² The other two accounts are of migratory theories. One states that the Yoruba's original home was somewhere in the north-eastern area of Africa (Egypt or Mecca) while the other places their origin in the ceaseless movement of tribes west-wards and south-wards across the continent before AD 600.

Often, one may be fascinated by the different versions of uncoordinated folk stories being told about the origin of the Yoruba. As a very young Yoruba man, I was told Oduduwa was the first man created by God just like the Bible said Adam and Eve were the

first to be created by God. The Bible says Cain the only surviving child of Adam and Eve went to another city called Nod to marry his wife. The question is who created the wife, the wife parent or the family of the in-law if any. Where did the parent of the wife of Oduduwa come from? My Teacher never told me the answer. We were even told Oduduwa was the son of one Lamurudu from Far East most likely Saudi Arabia and that some of Yoruba cousin can be found in Uganda; in fact they call the Yoruba people in Uganda Akaraba, which is true. On the strength of this, the paper will endeavor to plunge into diverse variances of stories of origin and state formation in Yorubaland.

Theoretical Conceptualization

The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines myth as a story handed down from old time, containing the early beliefs of a race. In a very broad sense, myth is referred to any traditional history. The main characters in myths are usually gods, deities or supernatural heroes whose stories were usually sacred stories³. A myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote and immediate past. Myths as traditions of the people are not invented, they are experienced. It is an aspect of orally transmitted tradition among various peoples of the world and form part and parcel of the history of the people⁴.

According to Merriam-Webster's Eleventh Collegiate Dictionary, this can be said to be a story

coming down from the past especially one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable. In other words, legend is a traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but unauthenticated. A legend is a semi-true story which has been passed on from person-to-person and has important meaning or symbolism for the culture in which it originates⁵. A legend usually includes an element of truth, or is based on historical facts, but with myth.

Variances of Yoruba Stories of Origin

In his book, *History of the Yoruba* (1950), Johnson traces the origin of the Yoruba to the 'East', sometimes understood by Muslim sources as the 'vicinity' or direction of Mecca. According to him the Yoruba originally came from the North-Eastern area of Africa. The similarities between the cultures of the Yoruba and the Egyptians in terms of religious observances, works of arts, burial and other traditional practices are enough evidence. It is from Egypt, after several years of journey that the Yoruba finally settled in Ile-Ife in Nigeria. Oduduwa is believed to be the first leader that led the Yoruba to Ile-Ife and subsequently sent his sons and grandsons to found other Yoruba kingdoms. Johnson's conclusion is worth recalling that:

"the Yoruba came originally from the East, there cannot be the slightest doubt as their habits, manner and customs, etc., all goes to prove"⁶.

Many traditions point to a fact that an alien group (Egyptians) immigrated to Yorubaland and mixed with the original population. Many oral traditions are replete with these stories. Apostle Atigbiofor Atsuliaghan, a high priest of Umale-Okun, and a direct descendant of Orunmila, claimed that the Yoruba left Egypt as a result of a big war that engulfed the whole of Egypt. He said the Egyptian remnants settled in various places, two important places being Ode Isekiri and Ile-Ife. The Awujale of Ijebuland has shown that the Ijebu descended from ancient Nubia (a colony of Egypt). He was able to use the evidence of language, body, scarification, coronation rituals that are similar to Nubians' etc, to show that the Ijebu are descendants of the Nubians. Since the Nubians were descended or colonized by the Egyptians, the Ijebu, and by extension, all Yoruba customs, derived from the Egyptian. Aderibigbe, an indigenous scholar, also accepts that the Yoruba people migrated from Egypt. He says:

"the general trend of these theories, most of them based on Yoruba traditions, is that of a possible origin from 'the east'"⁷.

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

Also, the Yoruba of Nigeria are believed by many modern historians to have descended from a people who were living on the banks of the Nile 2,000 years ago, and who were at the time in close contact with the Egyptians and the Jews. Sometime before AD 600, if this belief is correct. This people must have left their fertile lands, probably because of the changing climatic condition of their areas and have joined in the ceaseless movement of tribes west-wards and south-wards across the continent. We can only guess at the many adventures they and their descendants must have had on their long journey and at the number of generations which passed before they arrived. All we can be certain about is that they were a Negro people⁸. According to the studies of philology and etymology, most of the languages in Nigeria in the Kwa group of languages have a meeting point. The Yoruba and Idoma separated some six thousand years ago; while the Yoruba and Igala separated about two thousand years ago; two thousand years ago corresponds to the time that the Yoruba dialects: Ekiti, Ijebu, Oyo, Itsekiri, Ilaje, Ikale etc started having distinct dialectical identities. Linguistic studies have indicated that Yoruba in the eastern flanks of the Yoruba nation; Ekiti, Yagba, Kabba, Owo, Ijebu, Itsekiri and to some extent Ife, speak the most ancient Yoruba dialects. Glottochronological studies have also shown that the dialects in the south-east are more ancient than those of central Yorubaland and western Yorubaland.

The Oke Oramfe's version is another school of thought considered in the stories of Yoruba origin. Oke Oramfe is located in Ile-Ife. According to this account, Ile-Ife is not only the cradle of the Yoruba people but also of mankind⁹. In their paper, *Yorubaland up to 1800*, Akinjogbin & Ayandele (1980) give us a full picture of what Oke Oramfe's version is all about. According to the legend, there was a period when the world was covered by water. The Almighty God then decided to send some of his messengers to the world and they included Obatala or Orisa Nla or Orisa Alase (as the leader) and sixteen Oye (*immortals*). They were given five pieces of iron, a lump of earth tied to a white piece of cloth, and a cockerel. Somewhere on their way to the world, the leader, Obatala, got drunk with palm wine. Oduduwa seized the symbol of authority from him and eventually led the party to the world. The site on which they landed is traditionally known as Oke Oramfe in Ile-Ife. On arrival at the site, Oduduwa set down the five pieces of iron and placed the lump of earth on them. The cockerel then spread its toes on the earth. Consequently, the earth was formed and Oduduwa thus became the ruler. It was from this base (Ife) that he extended his authorities to other Yoruba towns and villages¹⁰. The idea of a rain and dove as the method of earth creation sounds more like magic than real. Archeologically, the Yoruba race is not more than

2000 years meaning other tribes excited before the Oduduwa appearance¹¹.

Oduduwa Revolution

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

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

get drunk) and his excessive claim to authority alienated many.

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

Practically, all were prepared to accept him as their ruler and all looked up to him to lead Ife back to order and peace. Obatala had no choice than to concede authority to him¹². A festival is held annually in Ife to celebrate and remember the conflicts of Oduduwa with the natives and Obatala worshipers during this festival mark their bodies with white dots to remember the small pox at Ideta-Oko and on the eleventh day of the festival, there is joyful celebration of the peace agreement which ended the wars. He was designated the father of the Yoruba nation because of his ability to conceive and create a more inclusive society using the old system of monarchy to serve a larger agglomeration of people, a wider polity, thereby making the Yoruba the most urbanized group of people in the tropical African forests. Iron existed before Oduduwa but it was during his time in Ife that the popular name of the god of Iron (Alaka-Aiye) was changed to Ogun – the name of an Ife king while wealth and sea had long existed but they were combined as one and given the name Olokun (*for wealth of riches*). Even the most senior Yoruba god, Orisa Nla became Obatala (Oduduwa's rival) and so known to all of Yorubaland. The Oduduwa revolution led to the concentration and increase in population of Ile-Ife due to civilization and development of trade. He created single system of government, provided new homes for settlement of groups, established outposts and toll gates to protect the trade routes into and out of Ife at Ipetumodu, Ita Ijero and Apomu to mention but a few etc.

For all Yoruba people after Oduduwa, Ife was the home of the progenitor of Yoruba race and home of virtually pan-Yoruba gods. Ife not only grew and prospered but also served as inspiration for major political changes in Yorubaland. Kingdoms like that of Ife sprang up in most parts of the Yoruba forest, all of them acknowledge Ife's leadership; their rulers claiming Ife as the source of their origin and legitimacy¹³, thus attracting the expression: Ife

o'ndaye, ibi ojumo ti mo wa (*meaning Ife, the point of creation where civilization originates*). For the great part that Oduduwa played as king of Ife, the collected imagination of the masses began to represent him as larger than life. Long before then, there had existed the myth about Olodumare sending some heavenly beings to come and establish life on earth¹⁴. That basic story would no longer hold water. Oduduwa had to be part of it. Indeed, he had to be the leader of the heavenly beings that came from heaven to earth with a chain. Over the next century, the myth-making genius of the Yoruba nation amplified and embellished Oduduwa's part in the story of creation. The titanic fight between him and Obatala had to be woven into it. So in the end, the full detail of the story came to be that Obatala had first led the heavenly beings coming towards the earth, but he got drunk on the way and Oduduwa had taken over and completed the mission, thus becoming the first man on the earth and the progenitor of the Yoruba nation.

Conclusion

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

drinking habit. This folktale was thus passed on by local historians as well as the people of his era from one generation to another in form of oral tradition. Moreover, Oduduwa's successors deified him and subsequent generations transposed him all the way back to the very beginning of creation and crowned him as the first human to walk the earth, the progenitor of the Yoruba race. Until deep into the twentieth century, some of the best minds available to us in historical scholarship took up the Rev. Samuel Johnson's direction which established Oduduwa's root in the east, some distant foreign land outside of the modern day Nigeria, and brought him as a conquering foreign prince to Ife. However, there is the possibility that the said east of Yorubaland where Oduduwa came from might be Benin since technically; Benin is geographically to the east of Ife. According to Ovbua Oba Edu Akenzua in his book, 'the existence of this fact has been proven beyond doubt by anthropological and folkloric evidence'¹⁵. The traditional accounts of the troubles, growth and development in Ife during Oduduwa's time were many and complicated; countless versions exist, each with its own twist, orientation and emphasis. Nevertheless, by carefully sifting through the infinite variety of traditions and versions, this basic traditional narrative was put together.

3/21/2015

Bibliography

1. Ellis, A. B. 1894. *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, etc.* Accessed on May 19, 2014.
2. *Notes on Nigerian History from Earliest Time to the Present*. 2009. (Department of History and International Studies Department, Adekunle Ajasin University: Akungba Akoko) Series One.
3. Daniel, F. M., 1969. *Africa in Time-Perspective*. New York, P. 41.
4. Nwankwo, U. M. 2012. *The Position of Oral Tradition (Myths, Mythology and Legends) in Historical Records*. (Imo State University: IACSIT Press: Singapore) 2012 International Conference on Humanity, History and Society IPEDR vol.34.
5. E2BN, 2006. *Teacher's Resources: What are Myths, Legends and Folktales?* (East of England Broadband Network: myths.e2bn.org/teachers/info311-what-are-myths-legends-and-folktales.html).
6. Johnson, S. 1921. *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. London: Routledge. p. 27.
7. Aderibigbe, A. B. 1976. *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. In *A Thousand Years of West African History*, edited by J. F. A. Ajayi and Ian Espie. Ibadan University Press: Ibadan. pp. 18-20.
8. Eyebira, A. and Oritseweyinmi, O. O. 2010. *Oduduwa and Yoruba Revolution in World History*. (<http://obamaandpeace.blogspot.com/2010/03/oduduwa-and-yoruba-revolution-in-world.html>) Accessed on 29th July, 2014.

- ⁹. Bamidele, O. 2013. *The History and Traditions of the Yoruba People*. TakingITGlobal: <http://www.tigweb.org/youth-media/panorama/article.html?ContentID=1088>.
- ¹⁰. Akinjogbin, I. A. and Ayandele, E. A. 1980. *Yorubaland Up to 1800*. In Obaro Ikime, Ed. *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heineman. pp. 24-29.
- ¹¹. Sowunmi, K. I. 2011. *Yoruba and Benin Kingdom: Ile Ife The Final Resting Place of History*. kshoid@2wayexports.com:Texas. P 3.
- ¹². DynamicAfrica. 2012. *Oduduwa, Olofin Adimula, oba and founder of the Yoruba people*. <http://dynamicafrika.tumblr.com/post/25112264188/oduduwa-olofin-adimula-oba-and-founder-of-the-yoruba-people.html>. Accessed on June 27, 2014.
- ¹³. Falola, T. and Michel, R. D. 1989. *Iwe Itan Oyo: A Traditional Yoruba History and Its Author*. *Journal of African History*. pp. 301 – 329.
- ¹⁴. David, A. A. 1991. *The Origin of life on Earth: An African Creation Myth*. Maryland: Sights Productions. pp. 31-32.
- ¹⁵. Idubor, N. 2010. *The Oduduwa Controversy Resolved*. Race and History News & View: http://www.raceandhistory.com/cgi-bin/forum/webbbs_config.pl?md=read;id=2312. Accessed on May 26th, 2014.