

# 1 *Geography and Society*

Stories of Oduduwa's arrival at Ile-Ife, and his children's subsequent migration into new territories (Atanda 1980:2; Johnson 1921), mark the beginning of Yoruba history studies, from Ajayi Crowther and Samuel Johnson onwards. One origin legend, claiming that the Yoruba had inhabited their territory from time immemorial, begins with Olodumare (God) sending Oduduwa from heaven to create the solid earth and the human race (Atanda 1980:1–2). In the legend, Oduduwa descends to earth on a long chain and lands at Ile-Ife, where he establishes solid ground and plants the first seed (Akintoye 2004:4–5). This tradition establishes Ile-Ife as the cradle of the Yoruba, and Oduduwa as the Yoruba's progenitor, or first ancestor. Oduduwa was considered the founder of the first Yoruba kingdom, situated in Ile-Ife, beginning the Yoruba kingship.

Another version of the origin myth, detailing later developments, claims that Oduduwa led the Yoruba to their present location after migrating from the east. The story claims that the migration was caused by political disturbances accompanying the expansion of Islam (Atanda 1980), but the exact location of the legend's "east" is not definite. A third claim, divergent from the above traditions, asserts that Ile-Ife was already inhabited when Oduduwa arrived. This introduces the story of Agbonmiregun, whom Oduduwa met at Ile-Ife (Atanda 1980). Despite their differences, these accounts all feature Oduduwa as the main character (Figure 1.1).

Early archaeological work at Ile-Ife and its immediate environs tended to support the theory of indigenous origin. Excavated material indicated a wealthy, sophisticated society with an established monarchy (Willett 1967). Radiocarbon dating places the "classical" period of Ife art at about AD 1000–1400, which is also the period covered by the king-lists of large polities like Oyo, Ketu, Benin, and Ijebu (Eades 1980). Many of these polities were established between the thirteenth

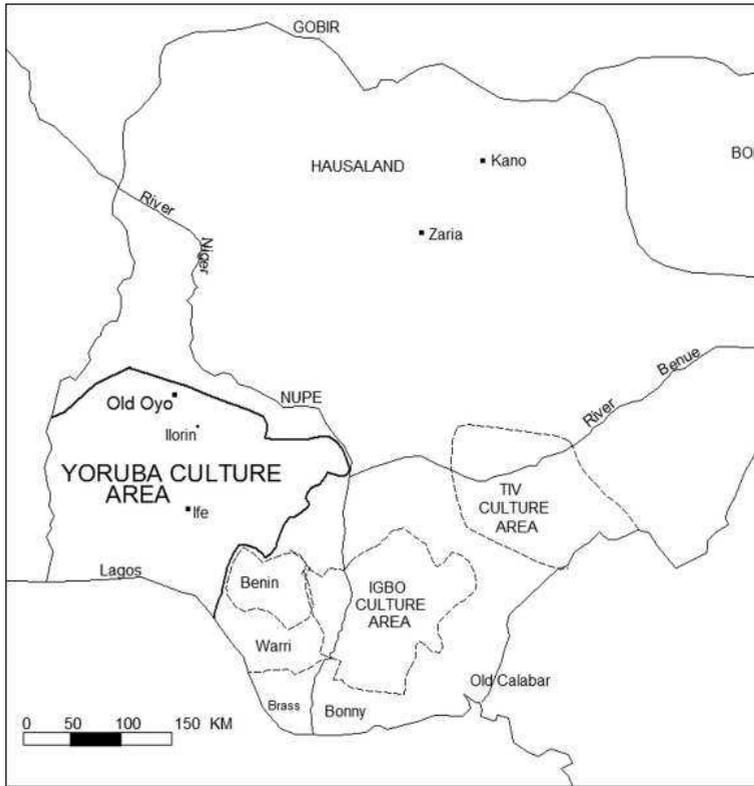


Figure 1.1 Yoruba culture area  
Drawn by the authors

and fifteenth centuries (Smith 1969), with the founders claiming to have migrated from Ile-Ife at some point (Eades 1980).

Increasing archaeological and linguistic evidence has fueled growing skepticism about some of the origin claims from Yoruba oral traditions. Archaeological work carried out in the last century at Iwo Eleru, near Akure in eastern Yorubaland and at Iffe-Ijumu in northern Yorubaland, points to the presence of Late Stone Age human settlements in Yorubaland as early as 9000 BC (Oyelaran 1991, 1998; Shaw 1980a). This indicates that people have lived for millennia in the area that would become the Yoruba region.

Linguistic evidence has weakened the theory of Oduduwa's migration from Mecca or the Nile Valley. Adetugbo (1973:203) has argued that the genetic similarities between the Yoruba language and other Kwa-family language groups such as Edo, Igala, Nupe, Igbo, Idoma, Ijo, Efik, Fon, Ga, and Twi mean that the speakers of these languages must have shared a common origin. Considering the time needed for differentiation to occur among these languages, the speakers must have had a close relationship in prehistoric times. Using their resemblance and the similar designations for local plants and animals, Adetugbo asserts that these languages were acquired by the Yoruba within tropical Africa, not outside the region. This undermines theories of migration that trace the original home of the Yoruba to the Middle East or North Africa.

Scholars have examined Yoruba settlement centers outside Ile-Ife, in other parts of Yorubaland. In the Ado kingdom in Ekiti, Ilesun is regarded as the oldest habitation in the area, and the Elesun, ruler of Ilesun, is still highly revered. According to traditions, the people of Ilesun never came from elsewhere, emerging at the foot of the Olota Rock (Akintoye 2010:14). Some legends suggest that the Ilesun people were later joined by other settlements from the nearby forests, who came to enjoy the protection of the spirit of the Olota Rock (Akintoye 2010). In the Owo kingdom, in the southeastern forests, Idasin was the earliest settlement in the area (Akintoye 2010:15). Alale was the ruler of Idasin and high priest of the Ogbo spirit, the protector of the area, using his power over other settlements that came after Idasin (Akintoye 2010). Oba Ile, near Akure, is recognized in oral tradition as the oldest settlement in the Yoruba region (Atanda 1980:3). Oba Ile was revered and feared by the surrounding settlements because it possessed the shrine of the strongest ancient spirits inhabiting the depths of the earth (Akintoye 2010:15).

The Yoruba language of the northeast, in the Okun subgroup's area, presents greater internal diversity in its dialects than other Yoruba areas (Obayemi 1980:148). This supports the theory that the "area of the greatest linguistic diversity is significant for determining the source of population dispersal" (Oyelaran 1998:67). Because of this diversity, Obayemi (1980:148) asserted that northeast Yorubaland's present population is indigenous to the area; they are not migrants from Ile-Ife or Oyo. Similarly, oral traditions from Igbomina suggest early settlements that correspond with the Ile-Ife period. A tradition of Qbà-Isin claimed that the generic *oriki* (cognomen) of the Qba people, "*omọ ẹrẹ*," meaning "offspring of the mud," describes the possibility of autochthonous origin (Aleru 1998; Raji 1997:44). Yoruba settlements existed outside Ile-Ife either before, or simultaneously with, the advent of Oduduwa. This suggests a period of Yoruba history before Oduduwa – a period about which much is still unknown.

Historians and other scholars today focus less on the origins and careers of Oduduwa's sons, focusing more on the region's general development of social and political complexity. Linguistic and archaeological evidence suggests that social and cultural differentiation had occurred before the period described in the present ruling dynasties' origin myths (Obayemi 1976:201).

In the beginning, it appears there was no general name for the Yoruba as a whole. People referred to themselves by the name of their subgroup, particular settlement, or geographic area – the Yoruba-speaking groups in the Republic of Benin and Togo still address themselves as "Ifẹ" rather than as "Yoruba" (Eades 1980:4). The name "Yoruba" was originally given to the Oyo people by the Fulani or the Hausa; it is interpreted to mean "cunning" (Bascom 1969:5).

The word "Yoruba," used to describe a group of people speaking a common language, was already in use in the interior of the Bight of Benin, probably before the sixteenth century. Yarabawa is the plural form for reference to Yoruba, and the singular is Bayarabe. In 1613, Ahmed Baba employed the term or a similar term to Yoruba to describe an ethnic group that had long existed (Lovejoy 2004:41). At the time, the term was not used for any particular subgroup of Yoruba such as Oyo; the Oyo polity was still relatively unknown. Some scholars used "Yoruba" for the Oyo group (Clapperton 1829:4; Law 1977), but the term "Yarabawa" or "Yariba" was found among Muslims (i.e., Hausa, Songhai), and also in Arabic very early and long before the rise of Oyo,

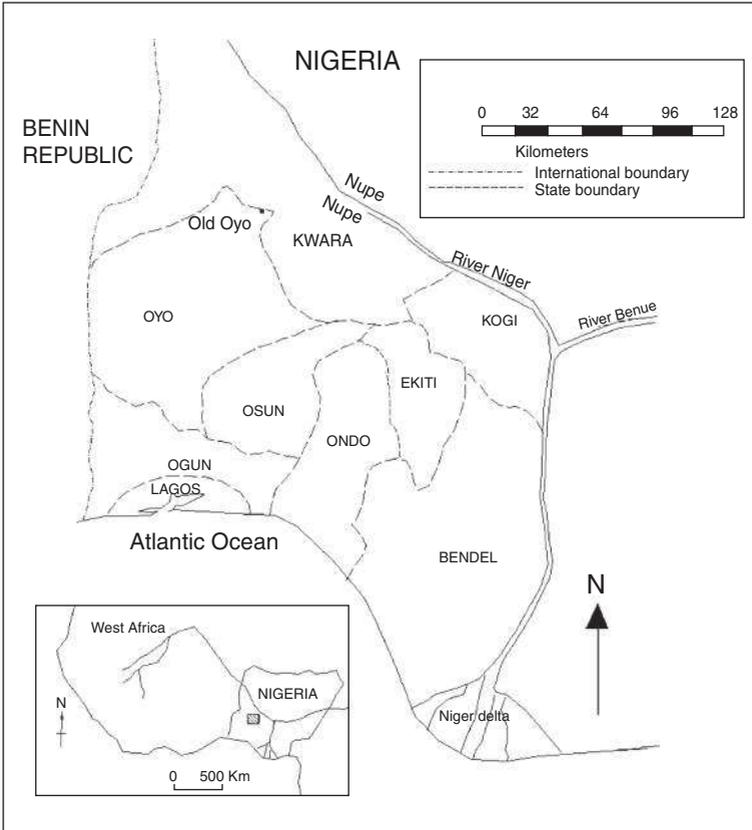
more as a reference to a whole group than to a specific polity (Lovejoy 2004:41). Some other names or nomenclatures used before the general term, “Yoruba,” discussed in Chapter 9, include Nago as in Brazil, and Lucumi in Cuba and other Spanish colonies in the Americas, as well as in French colonies. In Sierra Leone, they were referred to as “Aku.” “Terranova,” a Portuguese term which referred to slaves taken west of Benin’s territory, was also an early term for Yoruba that fell out of use in Spanish America in the seventeenth century (Lovejoy and Ojo 2015:358–359).

All these terms (e.g., Lucumi, Terranova, Aku, Nago) can reveal patterns of identity formation of people currently known as Yoruba. They were variously employed by “non-Yoruba” peoples as labels to describe “the other,” which the latter did not use to describe themselves (Lovejoy and Ojo 2015). The use of these appellations may be based on certain habits, characteristics, origin, location, or other special things that the “non-Yoruba” groups observed in “the other” group. A “Yoruba” identity is important only where other ethnic groups such as Tiv, Hausa, or Nupe are involved (Eades 1980:4). However, the conceptualization of the Yoruba as a collective identity dates back to the nineteenth century, through the Christian missionaries and the early Yoruba elite (Falola 2006b:30). By the 1890s, when Samuel Johnson (1921) completed his book, “Yoruba” had been widely used among the early Christian elite to define the land, people, and language (Falola 2006b). It seems, then, that the only thing we know about the origin of the word “Yoruba” is that its usage began to spread in the nineteenth century.

### **Geographical Location and the Yoruba Culture Area**

The Yoruba cultural and geographical spaces have adjusted over time, due to migrations within West Africa and beyond. Yoruba people have moved, like many other African groups, and they are continually moving to new areas. The modern map, placing Yoruba mostly in southwestern Nigeria, is a product of the nineteenth century – it does not accurately represent the settlement and migration patterns of the Yoruba before that time.

The war in the mid-nineteenth century significantly altered the Yoruba geographic space (Ojo 1966). The changing rulership of Yoruba-speaking people also changed their landscape. During the



**Figure 1.2** Postcolonial Nigeria Yoruba states  
 Drawn by the authors

height of Oyo's territorial expansion, Yoruba territory extended as far as Ketu, Idassa, Shabe, Kilibo, and beyond, into the Republic of Benin and Togo, and to the north around the banks of the Niger River (Clapperton 1829:56; Ojo 1966:18). The creation of international, regional, and provincial boundaries altered and reshaped Yorubaland further, realigning its peoples. In 1889, the Anglo-French international border divided part of western Yoruba. Afterwards, the Yoruba in Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin) lived with other ethnic groups in that area (Ojo 1966:18).

The bulk of the Yoruba currently live in southwest Nigeria, in six states: Ekiti, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Lagos (Figure 1.2). Large

populations of Yoruba people are also in the Kwara and Kogi states in north-central Nigeria. The Yoruba people in Kwara are the most abundant population in their state, but they have become a minority among other Yoruba groups. They are often addressed as northerners by those from the southwest, while northerners do not accept or recognize them as belonging to the north. Nevertheless, the traditional homeland of the Yoruba people is represented by southwest and north-central Nigeria, mainly by parts of Kwara and Kogi states.

Some Yoruba are in the Edo and Delta states, as well as other West African countries, such as the Republic of Benin, Togo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Outside Africa, Yoruba are present in Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the United States of America. Nigerian census figures are often inaccurate, and there are no accurate figures on the total population of Yoruba in Nigeria or elsewhere. However, the total number of Yoruba people in West Africa is estimated to be about 40 million, making the Yoruba one of the largest groups in sub-Saharan Africa (Abimbola 2006).

Yorubaland lies roughly between latitudes 6° 0' and 9° 0' N and longitudes 2° 30' and 6° 30' E, with an estimated area of about 181,300 square kilometers. It falls within three distinct ecological zones (Atanda 1980:1; Buchanan and Pugh 1955:13). The first zone is narrow lowland, going east to west and extending, on average, about 300 kilometers from the coast. It is fewer than 30 meters above sea level. The coast consists of mangrove swamps, lagoons, creeks, and sandbanks, and it forms the southern border of Lagos State and parts of the boundaries of Ogun and Ondo states. North of the coastal area is the second zone, the forest region. It narrows in the west and widens in the east, where it extends as far north as Iwo and Osogbo. The thick forest stretches up to southern Ondo State and Edo State to the east. Deciduous forest in the northwest continues from Abeokuta to Ondo and Owo in the east of Yoruba. Third, and farther north, is the derived savanna zone that extends into the Guinea savanna in the northwest. The area is characterized by rocky surfaces and hills with heights from 300 to more than 900 meters (Figure 1.3).

Yorubaland is dominated by north-to-south flowing rivers. The rivers flow into the Niger River, known in Yoruba as Odo Oya or River Oya (Bascom 1969:4). Most of the large rivers flow south, such as the Yewa, Ogun, Osun, Sasa, Omi, Oni, and Oluwa, emptying into the lagoon (Ojo 1966). This inlet extends eastward from the Republic

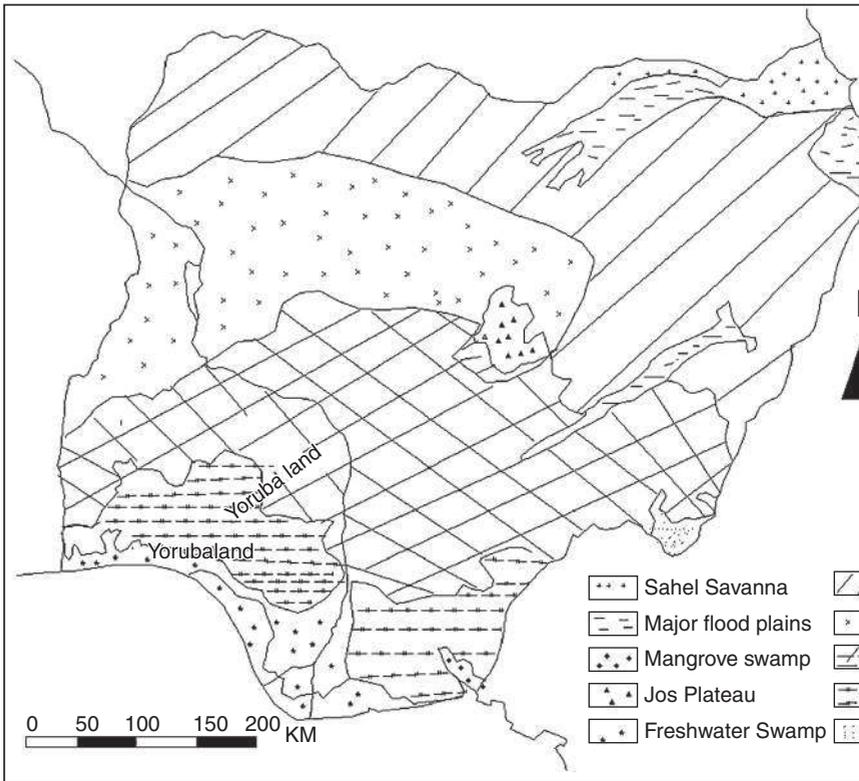
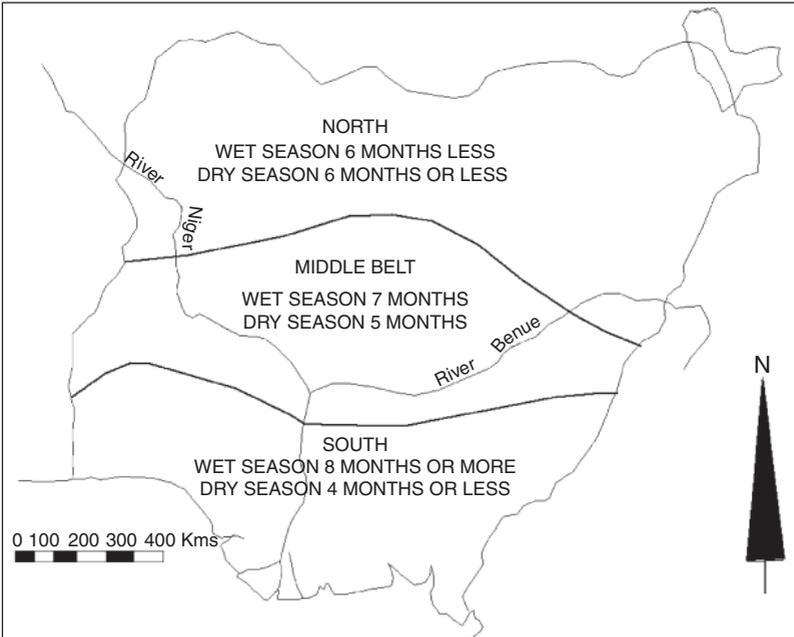


Figure 1.3 Nigeria's environmental zones  
 Modified from Buchanan and Pugh (1955)



**Figure 1.4** Nigeria – rainfall distribution  
 Modified from Buchanan and Pugh (1955)

of Benin to the Benue River, where it links with the Niger Delta creeks. It provides an inland route for canoes as well as an east–west trade route (Bascom 1969; Ojo 1966:23).

Yorubaland’s temperatures are consistently high, due to its location between about  $6^{\circ} 0'$  and  $9^{\circ} 0'$  north of the equator (Ojo 1966). Winds blow inland from the Gulf of Guinea in the rainy season, from April to October, and dusty harmattan winds blow southward from the Sahara to bring cooler temperatures in the dry season, from November to February (Bascom 1969). Moisture accumulates in the air from rainfall, dew, rivers, underground water, lagoons, creeks, and coastal water (Ojo 1966). Rainfall levels decrease moving inland from the coast. It rains heavily from June to September, raining along the coast for almost the entire year and raining in the north for at least half the year (Ojo 1966:24–5) (Figure 1.4).

Vegetation in Yorubaland reflects the rainfall distribution, becoming sparser inland. A narrow tract of swamp forest runs along the coastal area, among the creeks and freshwater lagoons. The high forest, located

in the southwest, is dry, open, and deciduous. An evergreen rainforest is in the southeast, between the swamp forest and the high forest (Ojo 1966). Derived and Guinea savanna vegetation is in the northern part of Yorubaland. The soil types in Yorubaland are diverse – for example, swamp soils are typical in the swamp forest near the coast, dark mud and clays are in the south, and sand occurs in some other places (Ojo 1966:26).

### **Yoruba Subgroups, Language, and Dialects**

The Yoruba subgroups are the Oyo, Awori, Owo, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ijesa, Ife, Ondo, and Akoko. Others are Egbado, Ibarapa, Egba, Itsekiri, Ilaje, Ketu, Sabe, Idaisa, Ife (or Ana, found today in the Republic of Togo), Mahi, Igbomina, Ibolu, Okun, and others (Akintoye 2010:8) (Figure 1.5). Each Yoruba subgroup inhabits a particular region. The Okun Yoruba subgroup inhabits the grassland region in the north, particularly near the Niger–Benue confluence. The Okun is divided into Owe, Oworo, Igbede, Ijumu, Ikiri, Bunu, and Yagba village units.

The Igbomina subgroup occupies territory west of Okun (made up of Yagba, Igbede, Ijumu, Abinu), in the Yoruba northern belt. The Ibolu subgroup is southwest of the Igbomina. The Oyo subgroup, one of the largest, is located west of Igbomina. The territory of the Oyo subgroup extends from the border with the Igbomina in the east to the boundary with the Ketu in the west (Akintoye 2010:8).

Located to the south of Okun are the Ekiti and Akoko subgroups, inhabiting the hilliest region of Yorubaland (Akintoye 2010). West of the Ekiti is the Ijesa subgroup, and west of the Ijesa are the Ife of central Yorubaland. The Egba subgroup is located west of Ife, and to the north of Egba is the Ibarapa subgroup. This area is the middle belt of Yorubaland, and it is mostly tropical forest, with the grasslands extending into the Ekiti and Akoko territories (Akintoye 2010).

The Owo subgroup is also south of the Ekiti and Akoko subgroups, and west of the Owo is the Ondo, Ijebu, and Awori subgroups. They inhabit the center of the thickly forested part of Yoruba territory (Akintoye 2010). The Ijebu and Awori extend farther south to the coast, inhabiting a significant portion of the lagoon.

The Itsekiri, the easternmost Yoruba subgroup, occupy the Atlantic coastland, surrounded by mangrove swamps, creeks, and lagoons. The Ilaje are next to the Itsekiri, and immediately north of the Ilaje is the