



*The Yoruba from
Prehistory to the Present*

The Yoruba are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa, with significant populations in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, as well as a sizeable diasporic community around the world. By considering the art, religion, economics, and political systems of the Yoruba, Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola chart the history of the Yoruba through the lens of the group's diverse and dynamic cultural and social practices. Using archaeological data, oral, and archival sources alongside rarely discussed local histories Usman and Falola form a rich and detailed picture of the Yoruba from a period of early occupation and agriculture, through the growth of complex societies and empires and the turbulent colonial period, to the present day, constructing a comprehensive account of Yoruba history brought together in a single volume.

ARIBIDESI USMAN is Associate Professor of Anthropology in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University. He is co-editor of *Movements, Borders, and Identities in Africa* (2009) and the author of *The Yoruba Frontier* (2012).

TOYIN FALOLA is a Distinguished Teaching Professor and Jacob and Frances Sanger Mossiker Chair in the Humanities at the University of Texas at Austin. A Yoruba chief, he has received numerous awards and twelve honorary doctorates. His most recent edited volumes include *Yoruba Culture and Customs* (2001), *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (2005), and *The Encyclopaedia of the Yoruba* (2016).

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ARIBIDESI USMAN

Arizona State University

TOYIN FALOLA

University of Texas at Austin



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This book is dedicated to Professor Banji Akintoye for his contributions to Yoruba Studies.

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Preface

This book provides a broad, chronological history of the Yoruba that emphasizes several overarching interpretive themes useful to the general reader, students, and specialists in the fields of African Studies, African Diaspora, Black Atlantic, Atlantic World, and African American Studies who encounter the Yoruba and lack the time to consult specialized works. The rich scholarly works and interpretations available on the Yoruba are often inaccessible to the general reader; we consider it timely to provide a book demonstrating the richness of Yoruba culture, especially one that combines interdisciplinary sources for understanding an African group's entire history within a single text. The scholarly, yet accessible, language of this book assists with classroom adoption for history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, literature, political science, and other studies dealing with Africa, African Diaspora, and World Civilization.

Yoruba studies have been approached from various perspectives in volumes recounting the social, political, economic, and cultural development of the group. We are guided by three main goals in this book. First, there are few general volumes portraying the Yoruba's past as a narrative stretching forward from prehistory, long before European contact, through the present day. This book corrects that imbalance by providing a history of the Yoruba over the long term, beginning well before the present-day composition of Yoruba groups and polities. In doing so, we have categorized Yoruba history into three periods: the precolonial, colonial, and the postcolonial independent periods. Each of these periods has been treated in its own right as individual sections.

Second, most book volumes focus on the primacy of Ile-Ife and Oyo polities, along with their political and cultural impact in Yorubaland, but few give substantial space to other large Yoruba polities – much less so for the periphery Yoruba polities. In *History of West Africa*, Volume 1, edited by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, Ade Obayemi's article "The Yoruba and Edo-speaking Peoples and their Neighbors before

1600 AD” suggests that the earliest context in which we know of a kingdom or dynasty in the Oyo area was in its relationship not only with its non-Yoruba neighbors but also with small-scale Yoruba frontier communities. This book, while recognizing the pivotal position of Ile-Ife and Oyo in Yoruba history, also considers the tremendous impact of other Yoruba polities and non-Yoruba neighboring groups in the formation of a powerful Yoruba frontier culture in Africa. We examine the relationship between different groups on the frontier to determine what impact the different societies have on each other.

Third, substantial archaeological information on Yoruba societies is available in a variety of published sources. One of this book’s goals is to incorporate available archaeological data with other sources for a broad view of Yoruba history from the past to the present. Archaeological data and oral tradition can be combined to produce historical narratives that go back more than two millennia. This book also addresses social and cultural aspects of Yoruba history, as well as the Yoruba’s impact on national and international history, to offer an analysis beyond the political and economic determinants predominant in current literature. This work balances different approaches to Yoruba history, rather than overemphasizing political and economic history at the expense of social and cultural history.

The Yoruba are one of Nigeria’s three dominant ethnic groups, with additional members living in Togo and the Republic of Benin. They occupy a significant place not only in Africa’s history but also in the history of the African Diaspora. Yoruba influence can be assessed in three areas.

First, in the very early period of their history, the Yoruba developed complex societies with enclosed, walled towns and a monarchical political structure based on a system of checks and balances. Yoruba cities were organized strongly along lineage (kin) principles, they had very few “parasitic,” non-agricultural inhabitants, and they had distinct, interdependent groups of craftsmen and merchants. This makes the Yoruba a good case study for understanding the nature of complex societies in Africa.

Second, the British abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century ushered in a period of Christian missionary activity. Yorubaland became one of the staging areas for the introduction of western cultures in West Africa. Sierra Leonean Yoruba returnees brought literacy to Yorubaland from around 1838. In the 1840s,

Christian missionaries continued to cultivate European literacy and established missions that were sometimes staffed by returnees who had been educated in Sierra Leone. Long-established Christian mission schools, coupled with massive indigenous efforts in educational development, have made the Yoruba some of the most educated people in Africa, as well as one of the most attractive subjects for research.

Third, the Yoruba's contribution to the transatlantic slave trade has generated a significant amount of scholarship. The Yoruba people did not constitute the largest population of enslaved Africans, but their past and present influence on diasporic culture in the Americas has been considerable, exceeding any such impact made by other African groups forcefully enslaved in the New World.

The book is divided into six parts and twenty chapters that are organized somewhat chronologically, starting with Chapter 1 providing background information on the Yoruba, and ending with Chapter 20, which summarizes the preceding chapters and also serves as a conclusion.

Finally, the authors do not pretend to have exhausted or captured every important event or development in Yorubaland. Also, we cannot claim that every part of Yorubaland is well represented in this book. We are limited both by a lack of sufficient data in some areas and of space in the book itself. At the same time, events unfold at such a fast pace in Nigeria that it is impossible to give a good historical analysis of contemporary affairs as they happen. Hence post-2015 developments in Yorubaland will require constant updating.

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