

The Migration Patterns and Identity of the Okun-Yorùbá People of Central Nigeria

Ilesanmi Akanmidu Paul
Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria
paulakanmidu@gmail.com

Abstract

Migration is a global phenomenon. From time immemorial, man has been moving from one place to another for temporary or permanent settlements. This is largely facilitated by natural or artificial factors. The former include natural disasters such as ecological change and draught, while the latter can be instigated by wars and search for better fortunes. This study examines the nature of the movements of the Okun-Yorùbá people from the western region of Nigeria to the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers in the Central Geographical Zone of Nigeria. It reveals how their long years of interactions with peoples of the confluence region were aided by the European delimitation of the area as part of the North, which has been the basis of sociopolitical agitation. The study reveals that Okun-Yorùbá people, despite their geographical delimitation as northerners, see themselves more as southerners.

Key Words: Migration, Confluence, Okun-Yorùbá, Owé, Iyàgbà, Bunú, Òwòrò and Ijùmú.

Introduction

Migration is a common and natural phenomenon all over the world. It has been a re-occurring episode in the chequered history and development of man. The movement of man from one place to another is as old as man himself. The intra- or inter-regional movements and migrations of people are mostly propelled by ecological, military, political, economic, and social factors. Thus, it can be argued that migration has largely engendered the

dispersal of people, and is responsible for the emergence and development of many settlements globally (Eade, 123–26). Udo (69–86) defined “migration” as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence and thus, considered it as rational behavior. Migration study is multi-faceted and cuts across many disciplines such as sociology, political science, geography, anthropology, economics and history, among others. It needs be emphasized that migration patterns differ considerably from one group to the next and from place to place due largely to ecological differences.

In this study, attention is focused on the Okun-Yorùbá people, who are among the groups that populated the confluence region of the Niger and Benue rivers of Nigeria. It explores their migration patterns and how the historical accounts have influenced their tradition of origin and identity. It identifies and analyzes the various controversies that have engendered diverse historical thoughts and agitations advanced by various groups to straighten their convoluted historical ideas in relation to their geographical environment and history.

The Okun-Yorùbá People

The Okun-Yorùbá people constitute one of the major ethnic groups that clustered around the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers in Nigeria. They have been mentioned along with other groups such as the Igala, Bassa-Komo, Idoma, Alago, Tiv, Afo, Koro, Gade, Egbira, Gbari, Nupe and some of the northernmost Yorùbá (Qbáyemí 1980, 621–632). The term Nupe embraces the Ebe, Kyede, Bassa-Nge, Gbedegi, Dibo, and Kakanda, while Idoma covers the Igede, Agatu, and others (Forde, 63–64). The Okun-Yorùbá are included not only because they live among the people of the Niger-Benue confluence, but because they have been involved with other confluence-dominated peoples as they are with other Yorùbá-speaking people of the west. Generally, many of the people around the confluence region have not received much scholarly attention (Afoláyan, 75–77; Falola 1988, 216–17). Where references have been made concerning them, they are treated as appendages of the larger polities such as Yorùbá, Benin, and Hausa-Fulani. The Okun-Yorùbá people are circumscribed between 7°, 30°N and 8°, 35°N latitude and 5°, 20°E and 5°, 30°E longitude. They are bordered to the north by the Nupe, by the Egbira to the East, and by other Yorùbá to the south and west. The Okun-Yorùbá people are comprised of five distinctive sub-groups, namely the Ìyàgbà, Ìjùmú, Owé, Bunú, and Ọwọ̀rò. All the sub-groups identified are presently in Kogi State of Nigeria. They are called “Okun” after their mode of greeting.

The term Okun, according to Simoyan (13–25), was first used to designate the people in this study by a British ethnographer, Eva Krapf Askari, in 1965.

He used it in an ethnographic parlance to refer to their mode of salutation instead of Kabba-Yorùbá, which had been the name previously used to refer to the five groups. Askari's adoption of the term Okun-Yorùbá is said to have been technically motivated, though he probably did not want to be caught in the web of existing conflicts that characterized the use of Kabba-Yorùbá. For some among them did not want to be associated with the name Kabba-Yorùbá: the Owé group was also known as Kabba, and they had used the term Kabba-Yorùbá as a way of lording it over the rest of the groups. Owé people had been accused of being collaborators of the Nupe who ravaged the confluence region to abduct and enslave many able-bodied Okun-Yorùbá men and women. After they had sufficiently raided the area, they eventually established their hegemony in 1859 until the oppressed people were relieved by the joint efforts of the Royal Niger Company and the Ogidi Ground Alliance in 1897. This brought the people under the sphere of influence and control of the Royal Niger's authority until the British Administration abrogated the charter of the Company in 1900, which finally brought the people under the British control (Ọbáyẹmí 1976, 4–6). Krapt Askari, who wanted to stay out of such conflicts and debates, used the common word of greeting to embrace the generality of the people. Ade Ọbáyẹmí later used the word Okun in his historical and archaeological studies of the area. This development was not without controversy. For example, Ọnaiyékàn stated that, "We find it hard to see how this eliminates confusion when it only introduces a new and unheard of expression to replace a term that had already become widely accepted, even though it may seem loosely used to foreign ethnographer who was out for precision at all cost" (20).

In spite the clamor of Ọnaiyékàn, it appears Okun became the general denotation for the people. We must, however, exercise caution while using the term Okun for this group of people because the term is not absolutely particular to them in Nigeria. The Ijèsà, Èkitì, Àkókó, and even Ọyọ-Yorùbá in Nigeria, in a broad sense also used *okun* as a form of greeting (Iyekolo, 20–28). It must however be pointed out that *okun* was considered sufficiently distinctive (mostly by outsiders) to be applicable in a special sense to the groups under study here. These groups share the basics of Yorùbá's culture even though their dialect is a variant of the Yorùbá. However, the five sub-groups enjoy mutual intelligibility. To outsiders, Okun's mode of greeting stands out, and serves as an acceptable marker for the purpose of group identification (NAK, 206) Their historical consciousness is reinforced by similar historical experiences, a peculiar sociocultural pattern, and in many instances they share similar legends of origin and migration. One of the major problems associated with the histories of peoples in sub-Saharan Africa before the nineteenth century is the provenance of information. Historians have relied mostly on

oral tradition for their past historical reconstruction. Oral history was the first and remains the most viable source for the past activities of such groups as the Okun-Yorùbá. This was later complemented by the archaeological discoveries and interpretations by Ade Ọbáyẹmí around the middle of the twentieth century. Although oral traditions in respect of the origin of the people under study are copious, they are in many cases different and conflicting. Clans within the same community do not necessarily claim the same historical origin or share the same pattern of migration. The people engaged in agriculture. They planted crops purposely for consumption and sale, until the coming of the Europeans who introduced cash crops such as cocoa, coffee, and cotton, among others, in the opening decade of twentieth century.

Divergent Views of Their Origin and Migration Patterns

Different views and suggestions exist regarding the origin of the people as well as their pattern of migration. Among the Ịjùmú, one tradition argues that Iyah town was the center from which the Yorùbá, Bunú, Àkókó, and Aides descended. According to the source, the progenitor of these groups originally lived in Iyah town and his wife, sons, and daughters migrated in various directions and produced the group that is today referred to as the Ịjùmú people. The autochthonous tradition would appear to link them with the Owe people with the northeasternmost Yorùbá groups, and associates them with a center of creation comparable to the position of Ilé-Ifẹ, the cradle of Yorùbá civilization (Ịjàgbẹmí, 2-3). This tradition appears to corroborate the argument of Ịjàgbẹmí who has argued that Okun-Yorùbá people do not trace their origin to Ilé-Ifẹ or Odùduwà, as is popularly argued in many places by Professor Ọbáyẹmí (Ịjàgbẹmí, 6-7).

Among the Ịyàgbà people, there are four identifiable sub-groups (i.e., those identified on the basis of a single traditional sacred point of dispersal and long history of association and operation) who lay claim to different historical origins. To the southeast are the Ịyàgbà (of Ejuku), Jege, Ifẹ-Olúkòtún, Alu, and Pọnyan. Many of these people claimed Awóyọ as their point of dispersal. Awóyọ, now defunct, was a community situated between Ejuku and Ifẹ-Olúkòtún. Ọbáyẹmí 1978 (9-10), has however, argued that the center was abandoned possibly due to overpopulation and irregular water supply. In his archaeological interpretation, Ade Ọbáyẹmí concluded that Awóyọ was an ancient town dating back to about the thirteenth century A.D. However, where the original settlers migrated from is still shrouded in obscurity, although an oral history, related by Olú of Ejuku, makes reference to Ilé-Ifẹ.

The western part of the Ịyàgbàland, which embraces communities such as Egbe, Eri, Ere, Ogga, Ejiba, and Okoloke, accepts Akata, near Ere, as the oldest

settlement, and the source from which most of them sprung (Ìjàgbèmí, 12). In the southwest are the Ìyàgbà (of Ogbe), Ipao, Iye, Irele, and Itapaji, with no sacred dispersal point equal in status to Akata, Awóyo, or Ilae. Another tradition identifies the Ìyàgbà with Iya-Agba, a royal princess from Ilé-Ifẹ̀, who settled at Ilae and from whom the name Ìyàgbà was derived (Ikùboríjẹ̀). In support of the Ilé-Ifẹ̀ tradition of origin, H. B. James claimed that the Ìyàgbà facial marks bear a resemblance to those of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ (NAK, 1926). This version of argument is at variance to the claim, which attributed the origin of the people to Iya-Agba source. Information collected from various Ìyàgbà communities appears to have discredited the Iya-Agba version but rather lays claims to direct migration from Ilé-Ifẹ̀ at different times. Among the Isanlu settlements, for instance, an Ilé-Ifẹ̀ origin is upheld through a hunter (Ikuborije; NAK, 1914). In like manner, Egbe traces its origin to an Ọ̀yọ́ prince known as Kelae. The source argued that Kelae escaped with his followers in order to avoid ritual death as demanded by Ọ̀yọ́ tradition at the death of the Alaafin (Olukundu). Another probable suggestion is that Kelae was an unsuccessful aspirant to the throne who bemoaned his loss by moving into exile (Egbe) with a large number of his supporters. The Mopa community rejects the Iya-Agba version but claims instead that they migrated from Ilé-Ifẹ̀ at different times (Olúkúndu). The tradition further states that Ifẹ̀-Olúkòtún had at one time used the title of Àjàlòrun (Sálámi), which seems to have been an archaic title for the king of Ifẹ̀, perhaps in vogue at the time of separation (Ọ̀lómọ̀là, 22–53). Ogbom sources strongly reject the Iya-Agba theory, upholding in its place a historical migration from Ijaiye during the heat of the Yorùbá intertribal wars. Their *oriki* (cognomen) indicates a close link with Ìjàiyẹ̀, as follows in this epigram:

*Omọ̀ méjì, omọ̀ fejí sọ̀dò ọ̀daa dandan
Ogbó ni Ìjàiyẹ̀, Akogun ran (Ojua)*

The child of rain, the child who uses rain for rituals in the dry season
The child with foundation/pillar at Ijaiye, he sounds the trumpet of war.

Apparently, Ìjàgbèmí (21) has described the Ìyàgbà link with Ilé-Ifẹ̀ as a recent rationalization, which has gained widespread acceptability. According to him, the Ìyàgbà people did not consciously and seriously associate themselves with Ilé-Ifẹ̀ until the 1930s. This was done only for sociopolitical and economic reasons, like the wearing of the beaded crown, which is only authorized by the Ooni of Ifẹ̀ for Yorùbá aspirants to the throne (Ìjàgbèmí, *ibid.*). The submission of most Ìyàgbà communities to an Ọ̀yọ́ or Ifẹ̀ tradition of origin tends to agree with the recently concluded study on historical affinity among the Yorùbá undertaken by Ishola Olomola. He concluded that the

dynasties in Ondo and Iyàgbà both stemmed from old Ọyọ in the last quarter of the sixteenth century (Olomola).

The Owe people trace their origin to Ilé-Ifẹ through the migration of three brothers who were presumably hunters. Each of the hunters established one of the three Owé settlements known as Katu, Kabba, and Odolu (Obaro, Institution 5-7). Aiyere, one of the communities in Ijùmú, claims a direct link with Ilé-Ifẹ through an Ife prince named Olúṣṣẹ. He was said to have left Ife in company of his sister known as Owé, perhaps as a result of succession disputes. The prince took along with him a crown that resembled that of Owé which has been kept to this day by one of the earliest groups that settled there known as Okomi's family (Aiyédògbón). While Olúṣṣẹ settled at Ayere because of the spacious land, his sister Owé moved on to establish new settlements at Kabba, which was subsequently named after her (Aiyédògbón). The Owé people agree that Ayere and Owé were related, but they aver that Owe was not a woman but a man. Be that as it may, we can conclude that the Owé and Ijùmú people may at one time have been one group, as evident in their geographical congruity and linguistic intelligibility.

Bunú tradition, as related in 1931 by the District Head to H. S. Bridel, the District Officer, is contained in the colonial reports (NAK). However, the account of the current OluBunú of Bunúland, Oba Ikusemoro, appears to deviate from the popular and common Ilé-Ifẹ origin. According to him, the Bunús' ancestors were three brothers, Ilono, Bilonu, and Adulu, who are believed to have been hunters from Idó, a town in Adó District, Èkìtì Division in Oñdó Province, now in Èkìtì State of Nigeria. The three were said to be ancestors of the Kirri people as well as of the Bunú. Later arrivals whose origin seems to be distinct from that of the Kirri settled at Olle and other towns in the middle of the district (Ikusemoro).

The Ọwọ̀rọ̀ people also trace their origin to Ilé-Ifẹ through migration. The migrants were believed to have been hunters who stayed temporarily at Kabba before they finally settled in various places in Ọwọ̀rọ̀land (Adama).

The above traditions are the various arguments of the peoples' origin. A careful synthesis of the various suggestions tends to yield an Ilé-Ifẹ origin the most probable, either directly, or indirectly through migration. Analyzing the views of the various communities that claim historical origin from Ijàiyè, Ọyọ, Iddo, or Èkìtì, which at any rate are Yorùbá towns whose establishments are connected to Ilé-Ifẹ directly or indirectly, we can thus argue with less ambiguity that they are Yorùbá. However, the migration from Ilé-Ifẹ by the people must have been at different times and in different waves. On the basis of linguistic factor, the historical theory of origin from Ilé-Ifẹ cannot be undermined. Neither can the peoples' close affinity with the larger Yorùbá group be discredited. It is on this basis that Akínjóbín asserts:

In any culture or civilization, language is basic, and whenever you find a similar language being spoken, there is no doubt that there must be some historical connections. Therefore, wherever, the Yorùbá language or any of its dialects is spoken in West Africa, we must assume that area at one time or the other formed part of what can loosely be called Yorùbáland (3–4).

Ọbáyẹmí's (1976, 144) argument also validates the above opinion when he identifies language or dialect as the most (and only) stable basis for defining cultural identity. The close link of the Okun-Yorùbá with the general Yorùbá in western Nigeria shows close affinity and historical connection between them. In addition, the political structure of the Okun-Yorùbá still bears semblance with that of Ife. In this case, the Oba (usually the head of communities, villages, and towns in Okun-Yorùbáland) was said to have been imported from Ilé-Ifẹ during the period of dispersion. Closely related is the practice of wearing beaded crowns by the Ọbas and other title-holders among the Okun-Yorùbá, which was said to have emanated from Ilé-Ifẹ. Moreover, the socio-cultural activities among the people also bear semblance to those of Ilé-Ifẹ. For example, the ceremonies surrounding kingship — forms of burial, installation, and coronation — among the Okun-Yorùbá people resemble those of Ilé-Ifẹ. Oral tradition holds that the ideas were brought from Ilé-Ifẹ. Also, the *Egúngún* masquerades among the Okun-Yorùbá people, the origin and practices of which were deeply explored in research by Famule, were also linked to Ilé-Ifẹ.

The Influence of External Forces on the Historical Origin and Identity of the People

The long inter-group relations of the Okun-Yorùbá people with other groups around the confluence region such as Nupe, Igala, and Ebirra among others, have significantly influenced their histories. This is what Shelton referred to as inter-culturation in his studies of Igbo and Igala relations. The most significant influence was the invasion of Nupe forces from the 1830s. The genesis of the process lies in the outbreak of the Uthman Dan Fodio Jihad of 1804–1812, which led to the ruthless termination of the existing political system in the north (Mason 1970, 193–209) This ultimately culminated in the establishment of a loosely organized decentralized dual empire in which the western part was under the supremacy of the Sarkin Musulmi of Sokoto and the eastern under the Emir of Gwandu (Nadel 69–86). The Nupe Kingdom that was located along the northwest fringe of the confluence region fell under Gwandu's jurisdiction. Malam Dendo was one of the Mohammedan preachers

to the "heathen countries." His arrival in Nupeland met with a succession dispute after the death of Etsu Mu'azu and Zugurma (Mason 1973, 43–62). The dynastic crisis that ensued between the two children of Zugurma — Jimada and Majia — naturally created two factions. However, the arrival and intervention of Malam Dendo ultimately preserved a balance of power (Ọbáyẹmí 1978, 61–87). His full support from Gwandu and the mobilization of military forces to his advantage led to his victory over the two Nupe princes. He afterwards established hegemony until his death in 1833. His death resulted in succession disputes between Malam Dendo's children and the descendants of the rival Nupe princes. However, the mediation of Gwandu's authority gave Dendo's descendants a victory, which led to a regularized system of succession (Ibid).

With this development, the political crises in Nupeland were brought under control and Bida became the fixed seat of the new political order, which controlled most of Nupeland. With relative peace attained, the new kingdom sought for expansion by exploiting the surrounding people in its drive for economic prosperity and local military supremacy (Ige, 19–28). This informed the invasions of Okun-Yorùbáland. The invasion took dramatic turns. In the first instance, the socioeconomic situation of Nupeland was in ruins as a result of the long-protracted wars. The need therefore to revamp the battered economy of the kingdom became the major concern of the political leaders. Secondly, the interconnectedness, as we have seen earlier, between Dendo and Gwandu had made Nupe a vassal state to Gwandu. It thus became a routine order on Nupe political heads to ensure regular flow of tribute payments of cowries and slaves (*gainsuwa*) to Gwandu (Ìgè). Prompt payment of these tributes was a yardstick of allegiance and loyalty to Gwandu's supreme political order. Moreover, it became necessary to build a formidable army that would protect the kingdom from internal and external attacks. This became apparently necessary in the midst of protracted internal political squabbles, which had characterized the kingdom. Nupe realized the potential of the Okun-Yorùbá territories in term of their able-bodied-men, slaves, and agricultural resources needed in the military and its agricultural sector to succeed in the revamping of its disintegrated economy. In addition, the subjugation of the Okun-Yorùbá was thought to be strategic in launching southwards to Yorùbáland (Ìgè).

It would appear to have been easy for the Nupe forces to realize their ambition because Okun-Yorùbá did not enjoy any form of protection from the Ibadan Kingdom, Èkìtì Parapò, or Ìlọ́rìn, which were sophisticated polities around them. Similarly, the segmentary nature of the Okun-Yorùbá people deprived them of a common voice against their common enemies. Nupe forces suppressed the individualistic Okun-Yorùbá's effort put in place by various communities on account of their superior weapons, relative tactics, and more sophisticated military prowess that could not be matched by the Okun's

use of ordinary bows and arrows, cutlasses, and axes (Idrees, 639–660). At this period, the Nupe had access to dane-guns, poisonous arrows, and horses, most of which were supplied to them from Hausaland (NAK 1926; Mason 1973 453–71). The fall of the Okun-Yorùbá to the Nupe occurred in episodes. Nupe armies ravaged Okun-Yorùbá communities such as Egbe, Ejiba, Ogbe, Agbagun, Owe, Ohura, Akutupa, Kirri, Isanlu, Iluke, Odokoro, Olle, Obura, and Akpa, among others (Mason 1970, 195–97; Qbáyẹmí 1978, 151). They embarked on harrying, surprise raids, kidnappings, and abductions. A European traveler, Laird, who visited our area of study during the time, reported thus:

I learnt ... Felatahs were still about Egga ... levying contributions on the terrified natives ... they come suddenly upon a town ... inflict the most cruel fortune upon the more wealthy inhabitants to compel them to discover their property. This horde of barbarians set fire to almost every city, town, or village, which they visit, in their predatory excursions (Laird and Oldfield, 82–89)

The above statement gives a clear picture of the nature of Nupe invasion on the Okun-Yorùbá people. The people were captured as slaves and transported to Nupe and Hausaland. Baikie noted as early as 1862 that:

There ... were often 300–400 slaves in Bida market daily ... and that there was the possibility of the number to increase to 800 ... should the raids were successful (NAK, 738/2838)

Lugard attested to the bitter experience when he wrote, “hundreds of ruins attest to a population and property now gone” (Lugard, 2–6). Qbáyẹmí (1978, 145) further observed that Nupe raids became more sporadic and that many Okun-Yorùbá settlements went into extinction. Thousands of Okun-Yorùbá people were transported across the Niger to Nupeland as *tungazi* (plantation) slaves, and kept along the northern fringes of Bida (Mason 1973, 43–62). Many became domestic servants. To ensure a steady flow of slaves, the Nupe invaders established a political hegemony over the Okun-Yorùbá people. The pattern of administration imposed by the Nupe overlords was based on the Ogba system (Apata 1986, 103–110; Awe, 64–66). The Ogba (known as *ajèlè* in central Yorùbáland) was the Nupe resident who served as the link between the Nupe potentates and the subject people. As the sole representative of the Etsu, the Ogba wielded enormous powers. The Etsu divided the entire Okun-Yorùbáland into fiefs. These divisions did not conform to the indigenous administrative patterns. The primary duty of the Ogba was the collection of tributes. They were rapacious and cruel in this assignment.

Indeed, social construction of human identity was engendered and determined by multiple factors. The process of cultural contact with the Nupe

induced and propagated elements of cultural change often engendering approximating forms, constituting a cultural dislocation that led to the destabilization of norms and the fragmentation of different and unique traditional and sociocultural formations. It expressed traditional cultural episteme and indigenous ontological paradigms almost to the point of absolute annihilation. The decades of the Nupe's hegemony led to the forcible introduction of Nupe culture. For instance, the Okun-Yorùbá people were forced to accept Islam, which had become a state religion in Nupeland. There were also intermarriages between the Nupe and the Okun-Yorùbá people and the resulting offspring were given Nupe names such as Jimba, Shaaba, and Kpotun. Not only that, but many of them bore Nupe tribal marks. This feature still survives in many parts of Okun-Yorùbáland. From all indications, the relationships between the Nupe and the Okun-Yorùbá groups were unprecedented.

By the 1890s most of the Okun-Yorùbá sociocultural practices seem to have been lost, as the whole area was fully charged with Nupe culture. The overbearing and obnoxious rule and demands of the Ogbá became rather unbearable. Having realized the futility in the independent effort to rebuff the Nupe excesses, the Okun-Yorùbá people unanimously appealed to the white men (missionaries and colonial government) in Lagos for help to rescue them and their land, which lay in ruin and under the yoke of the Nupe forces (Flint, 248–49). The white men in Lagos referred the request to the Royal Niger Company (RCN) in Lokoja, who had claimed the whole area as its sphere of influence for the British Government during the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 (Retberg, 67–72). The appeal coincided with the efforts taken by the company to repel any rival to her trade monopoly and networks around the Niger-Benue confluence. This culminated in the popular Ogidi Ground Alliance war of 1895–97 (Ige, 26–32). The war was unwinnable for the Nupe forces. Their inability to withstand the attacks necessitated their retreat. They were chased out of Okun-Yorùbáland unceremoniously, while Goldie triumphantly entered into Okun-Yorùbáland to loud ovations of victory (Flint). He assembled the Okun-Yorùbá people together at Kabba and formally proclaimed the independence of the Okun-Yorùbá people. The collapse of the Nupe hegemony over the Okun-Yorùbá people, however, ushered in another phase of history: the full establishment of Company rule (Ige, 28–29). The Royal Niger Company was in charge. The company's armies were stationed across Okun-Yorùbáland probably to ensure the Nupe army did not make any further incursion. In the midst of this development the Royal Niger Company continued with her trade around the area (Flint).

Many but not all Okun-Yorùbá people who had been enslaved in Nupeland returned to their homeland. It is instructive to note that many of these returnees had imbibed Nupe cultural practices after decades in Nupeland (Basia).

The mass exportation of Okun-Yorùbá people to Nupeland led to cultural borrowing and transfer. For instance, some of the popular *Egúngún* (masquerades), which are now associated with the Okun-Yorùbá people, were brought from Nupe. These sociocultural ceremonies of *Egúngún*, which attract people annually from different walks of life, were said to have been learned from the Nupe. Not only that, Imole (a women's cult), which is popularly practiced among Okun-Yorùbá communities such as Owe and Bunú, had its origin from Nupeland (Basia). The choice of traditional red burial cloth popularly known as *aso ipo* among the Okun-Yorùbá, especially the Bunú people, which Rene (64–69) argued to be strange to the Yorùbá people of western Nigeria, was said to have been imbibed from Nupeland.

The contact of Nupe with Okun-Yorùbá people had landmark impact on the sociopolitical landscape, as explored earlier. This appeared to have challenged the existing believe of the people on the sociopolitical connection that had been in existence before this time. Apata argued that this process was forced on the Okun-Yorùbá people and by the time the Nupe imperialist enterprise was sacked in 1897, most of these sociocultural practices had become acculturated to the Okun-Yorùbá people. Similarly, the introduction of Islam into Okun-Yorùbáland, according to Mason (1970, 207), was largely facilitated by the Okun-Yorùbá slave returnees, who had been converted in Bida and other Nupe territories. This argument is opposed to Niven's earliest position, that the people around the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers were animists. In addition, the contiguity of Okun-Yorùbá settlements within the people of the confluence region such as the Egbirra and Igala further aided fundamental cultural infiltration and adaptation. For example, the inter-tribe marriages, trade links, and agricultural activities have facilitated cross-fertilization of culture in areas of tribal marks, names, food, clothing, and crop planting, among others. These factors have in one way or another influenced the culture of the Okun-Yorùbá people. However, some aspects of the imbibed culture by the people was to later cause other imbroglio during the colonial period. By 1900, the British Government abrogated the company charters and took over the full administration of the area. Because of the activities of the Nupe in our area of study, the whole area of our study was merged together as northern Nigeria. The Europeans based provincial and divisional delimitation on contiguity and not on cultural affinities.

Struggles for Identity

Shortly after the delimitation of the area of our study, as part of northern Nigeria, the Okun-Yorùbá people expressed objection towards what they perceived as cultural dislocation from their kith and kin in the west. Lugard

justified the action on “the principles of established jurisdiction”; according to him, the lines of demarcation must be decided by local jurisdiction and not on “racial affinity” (Lugard). Based on this, we can infer that Lugard did not recognize the unpopularity of the Fulani rule among the Okun-Yorùbá people. His action left behind two major implications: in the first instance, the action led to the separation of the Okun-Yorùbá from the bulk of the Yorùbá population in the Western Region. Secondly, it laid the foundation for the struggle for relocation and identity recreation within the Okun-Yorùbá’s historical and cultural framework (Ọláyẹmí 1980, 621–632). Under the colonial dispensation, the northern Yorùbá, Okun-Yorùbá inclusive, were divided into two main provinces of the northern protectorate, Ịlọrin and Kabba (Ọláyẹmí 1980). With the exception of West Yagba, which remained under the Patigi Province, all other groups, Owe, East Ịyàgbà, Ịjùmú, Bunú, and Ọwọ́rọ were grouped under the Kabba Province. The Obaro of Kabba was appointed the paramount ruler. Indeed, the colonial government attempted to make the Province an Emirate and to transform the Obaro into an Emir, in conformity with the general practice in northern Nigeria, but it failed. The colonial arrangement of making the Okun-Yorùbá people remain in the north, contrary to their perceived identity, resulted in a series of agitations from 1900 up to 1960. For instance, the East Yagba traditional chief pointed out in a memorandum sent to the colonial government that they were not Hausa but a distinct ethnic group during the 1950s constitutional conference.

The Action Group (AG), a Yorùbá-dominated party in the Western Region under the leadership of Chief Ọbáfẹmí Awólọwọ, also vehemently pressed the colonial government to relocate the Okun-Yorùbá people with their people in the west. He did this on the principle of ethnic affinity and the right of ethnic nationalities to home rule (Bello 26–31). The same position was maintained at the 1958 Constitution Conference in London. The AG allied itself with other minor political associations such as United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), the United National Independent Party (UNIP), and the Ịlọrin Talaka Parapo (ITK) (Adalumo, 280–81). The AG almost turned what initially looked like a cultural struggle into a political one. This explains why even after independence in 1960, the relocation issue remained as hot as it was before independence. However, the Willink Minority Commission set up by the colonial government in 1957 to inquire into the fears of minorities and the means of allaying them seemed to stand against the agitative tendencies of the Okun-Yorùbá and the AG that took over the matter (Willink, 3–5). The Commission toured the whole of Nigeria between 1957 and 1958, receiving memoranda and also taking oral evidence from all interest groups. Based on the various memoranda and interviews, the Commission confirmed that there was basis for fear among the minority groups, but with reference to the northern

Yorùbá, our area of study, it recommended against any changes in the status quo. It rather recommended the following:

- a. That there should be no change in the boundary between the Northern and Western Regions except as the result of a plebiscite;
- b. That a plebiscite should be held if there were general agreement at the conference that it should be held and that it should be binding;
- c. That in any area transferred at least 60 per cent of the votes cast must have been in favor of transfer (Kirk-Green, 50–53)

The report and recommendation of the Commission laid to rest the agitation of the Western merger issues and other minority agitations in the colonial period. The suppression of the agitations without consideration to whether the people concerned were at peace with the recommendation partly resulted in the collapse of Nigeria's First Republic as well as the emergence of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967–70 (Falola 2005, 81–93). It would appear that the British Colonial Government overlooked the cultural basis of the Okun-Yorùbá demand and took everything to be political agitation, whereas the salient argument of the people was woven around cultural affinity. The Okun-Yorùbá saw themselves as alien within the predominantly Hausa/Fulani and Islamic northern Nigeria.

The Northern Government crossed the agitations of the Okun-Yorùbá to join their kith and kin in the West even after independence. The young Okun-Yorùbá-educated men such as Sunday Awóniyi and Silas Daniyan were appointed to certain key positions in the northern government. For instance, Awóniyi would find reasons to argue why he and his people (Okun-Yorùbá) were northerners. It has been said that his claims probably made it difficult for any meaningful success to have been made despite all effort mustered for West-merger since after Nigeria's independence (Agboólá, 34–35). Also, the military intervention in politics in 1966 and the outbreak of Nigeria's Civil War in 1967–70, coupled with the military's arbitrary creation of states without particular principle but for their selfish interests, since 1967 had constituted a clog in the realization of the Okun-Yorùbá agitation (Osaghae, 16–23). For instance, in 1967, among the twelve states created, the Okun-Yorùbá people were conscripted in the West-Central (later renamed Kwara State). In 1991, Kogi State was carved out from Kwara and Benue States; the Okun-Yorùbá people went with Kogi State. It must be noted that none of these developments has satisfied the agitation of the Okun-Yorùbá people. From all indications, the creation of states seemed to have been a political solution to the people's agitation rather than cultural and ethnic solutions, which to the best interpretation of the people undermined the cultural demands of the Okun-Yorùbá people for recognition of their Yorùbá identity. The creation of Kogi State to

which Okun-Yorùbá people presently belong seems to have further aggravated the agitation as they became a minority among the minority groups in the state.

Conclusion

The Okun-Yorùbá's pattern of migration takes different forms at different times. However, cultural and linguistic evidence has proved that they are of Yorùbá stock. However, their long inter-group relations around the Niger/Benue with other group of peoples that populated the confluence region have influenced their histories. In addition, the European activities during the colonial rule have further added impetus to the controversial argument about the identity of the people. The indirect rule system, which favored the existing order in northern Nigeria, entrenched the hybridization and legitimization of foreign culture, which to a large extent has affected their histories. What appears to have complicated the issue is the geographical delimitation since colonial rule, which had severed the people from their kith and kin. The subsequent developments only built on the status quo. To this day, even though the Okun-Yorùbá people see themselves ethnically as Yorùbá people, the political arrangements classify them as northerners. This has long been the basis of agitation, which has remained unsolved.

Works Cited

- Adalumo, Aduke. "A Socio-Political History of Kabba Division, 1900–1976." PhD Diss., University of Ilorin, Nigeria, 1995.
- Adama, P. L. Oral interview conducted at Agbaja, Ọwọ̀rọ̀, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2008.
- Afọ́láyan, Funsho. "Towards a History of Eastern Yorùbáland." In *Yorùbá Historiography*, ed. Toyin Falola, 137–49. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1991.
- Agbo, E. A. Oral interview conducted at Egunbe, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2003.
- Agboola, Comfort "Administrative Grouping and Intergroup Relations in Southern Ilorin." PhD Diss., University of Ilorin, Nigeria, 1995.
- Aiyedogbon, O. K. *Oral History*, Aiyere, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2009.1
- Akinjogbin, Isaac. "Towards a Political Geography of Yorùbá Civilization." In *Proceedings of the Conference held at the University of Ife*, ed. I. Akinjogbin and G. O. Ekemode, 1–12. July 26–31, 1976.
- Apata, Zachaeous. "Administrative Changes and Reorganization in the Old Kabba Province of Northern Nigeria 1897–1939." PhD Diss., University of Ife (now Ọbáfẹ́mí Awólọ̀wọ̀ University), Ilé-Ifẹ̀ (Nigeria), 1986.

- . "The Nupe Expansion and Overthrow of Nupe Imperialism in Okun-Yorùbáland." *ODU: A Journal of West African Studies* 22 no. 2 (1990): 112–127.
- Awe, B. "The Ajele System: A Study of Ibadan Imperialism in the 19th Century." *JHSN* 3 no. 1 (1965): 21–37.
- Babatunde, K. Oral interview conducted at Iyamoye, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2008.
- Basia, G. O. Oral interview conducted at Odo Ape, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2008.
- Bello, Fatai. "Politics of Protest: A Study of Ìlṣorin Parapo (ITP)." Master's thesis, University of Ìlṣorin, Nigeria, 1986.
- Eade, Jacob. *The Yorùbá Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Foreign Office (F.O) 7/434, Baikie to Russel, 13 March, 1862.
- Falola, Toyin. "A Research Agenda on the Yorùbá in the Nineteenth Century." *History in Africa* 15 no. 1 (1988): 134–160.
- . *The History of Nigeria*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Famule, O. F. "Arts and Spirituality: The Ìjùmú Northeastern-Yorùbá Egúngún." PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2005.
- Flint, Jeremiah. *Sir George Goldie and the Making of Nigeria*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Forde, David, ed. *Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence*. London: International African Institute, 1955.
- Idrees, Aliyu. "Colonial Conquest and Reaction in the Middle Niger: The British Subjugation of the Nupe 1897–1900." In *The History of Central Nigeria*, vol. 1, ed. Aliyu Idrees and Y. Ochefu, 51–64 Lagos: CSS, 2002.
- Ige, Jide. "The Okun-Yorùbá Factor in the Royal Niger Company of Bida (1885–1985)." *Ìlṣorin Journal of History* 1 no. 2 (2003): 23–32.
- Ihonvbere, Julius. "Are Things Falling Apart"? The Military and the Crisis of Democratization in Nigeria," *JMAS* 34 no. 2 (1996):46–61.
- Ìjāgbèmi, Adeleye. "Christian Missionary Activities in Colonial Nigeria: The Work of Sudan Interior Mission among the Yorùbá, 1908–1967." *Nigerian Magazine Publication*, vol. 3, no.1. Ibadan:1986.
- Ikuborije, A. A. Oral interview conducted at Isanlu, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2004.
- Ikusemoro, J. A. Oral interview conducted at Olle, Bunú, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2009.
- Iyekolo, Ebenezer. *The People of Okunland*. Lagos: Concept Publications, 2006.
- Kirk-Green, Aliyu, ed. *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Source Book 1966–69*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Laird, Macgregor, and R. A. K. Oldfield. *Narrative of an Exploration into the Interior of Africa by the River Niger in Steam-Vessels Quorra and Alburkah, in 1832, 1833 and 1834*. Vol 2. London: Richard Benley, 1937.
- Lugard to Alfred Lyttleton. "The Niger Committee of 1898: Lord Selborn's Report." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 1 no. 3. (1968): 98–111.

- Lugard, Frederick. *Annual Reports for Northern Nigeria (Kabba Province)*; Colonial Office, 1901–1911. National Archives, Kaduna, File, CO/1241914.
- Mason, M. "Captive and Client Labour and the Economy of Bida Emirate: 1857–1901." *Journal of African History*, 14, no. 4 (1973): 453–471.
- . "The Jihad in the South: An Outline of the Nineteenth Century Nupe Hegemony in North-eastern Yorùbáland." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 5, no. 2 (1970): 193–209.
- . "Population Density and Slave Raiding: The Case of the Middle Belt of Nigeria." *Journal of African History* 10, no. 4 (1969): 43–62.
- Nadel, Frederick A. *Black Byzantium*. London: Oxford University Press, 1942. National Archives Kaduna (NAK) File 738/2438, Vol. 1.
- National Archives Kaduna (NAK) 110 prof. 1944 Vol. 1; Annual Report, 1931.
- National Archives Kaduna (NAK) Lemu District Notebook, Box 21.
- National Archives Kaduna (NAK) Loko Prof. 23/1926, Ìjùmú District.
- National Archives Kaduna (NAK) Loko Prof. 5/07/1914 Ìyàgbà District Assessment Report by James, H. B.
- National Archives Kaduna (NAK) Loko. Prof, File No 206: Annual Report, Kabba Province, 1932.
- National Archives Kaduna (NAK) F.O. 84/1351, Simpson to Granville, 21 Nov.1891, "Report of the Niger Expedition" 1871, Enclosure 3.
- Niven. "The Kabba Province of the Northern Provinces, Nigeria." *Geographical Journal* 68, no. 4. (1926):101–7.
- Obayemi, Ade. "Change and Incorporation in the Niger-Benue Confluence Area: The Case of the Okun-Yorùbá." A paper presented at the "Man, History and Culture in the Niger-Benue Region, Lokoja" conference, 1987.
- . "History, Culture and Group Identity: The Case of the Northeast or Okun-Yorùbá." Seminar paper, Centre for Nigeria Cultural Studies, (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria), 1976.
- . "Sokoto Jihad and the Okun-Yorùbá: A Review." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 9, no. 2 (1978): 61–87.
- . "States and Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence Area." In *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, ed. I. Obaro, 144–186. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980.
- Ojua, M. I. Oral interview conducted at Ogbom, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2009.
- Olayemi, Akinwumi. "The Northern Yorùbá and the Struggle for Identity." In *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century*, ed. T. Falola, 91–103. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1992.
- Olomola, Ishola. "How Realistic are the Historical Claims of Affinity among the Yorùbá?" Ife Seminar paper, 1977–1979, University of Ife (now Obáfẹ́mi Awólówọ́ University) 1981.
- Olukundu, J. O. Oral interview conducted at Egbe, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2009.

- Olumodi, B. Oral interview conducted in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, 2009.
- Onaiyékàn, John. "The Priesthood among the Owe-Yorùbá of Nigeria and Pre-monarchical Ancient Israel: A Comparative Study." PhD Diss., Pontifical University, Rome, 1975.
- Osaghae, Eghosa. *The Crippled Giant, Nigeria since Independence*. London: C. Hurst and Co., 1998.
- Renne, E. "Aso Ipo, Red Cloth from Bunú." *African Arts* 15, no. 3. (1992): 112-21.
- Retberg, I. R. *A Political History of Tropical Africa*. New York: Maryknoll, 1965.
- Salami, K. Y. Oral interview conducted at Ife-Oluketun, Kogi State, Nigeria, 2009.
- Shelton, A. *The Igbo-Igala Borderland: Religion and Social Control in Indigenous African Colonialism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971.
- Simoyan, Olayinka. "The Origin of Okun-Yorùbá People." In *Lest we Forget: A Compendium of Events and Activities at First Okun Day Festival*, 1-21. Lagos: Okun Development Association, 2002.
- The Obaro Institution. *OKE META: A Journal of Kabba and Culture* 1, no. 1 (1986): 1-14.
- Udo, Rowland. "International Migration and Development." In *A Geography of Nigerian Development*, ed. Jerome Oguntomisin et al., 34-41, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978.
- Willink, H. "Commission of Enquiry on Minority Problems and Means of Allaying Them." London: HMSO, 1958.

