About the Name Yoruba

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A curious debate is going on about the group name of the Yoruba nation, the name 'Yoruba'. All sorts of strange and fanciful things are being said about this name. Also, many people are calling on me to intervene in the debate. I therefore hereby intervene. But I cannot participate in the more flippant levels of debate over this or any matter; I can only make known the results of my serious research. I might add that what I reveal here is a small peep into a very important body of research on the Yoruba nation, a body of research that will, hopefully, soon appear as a book on the profile of the Yoruba nation.

In modern times, the Yorùbá people in Nigeria have exhibited a remarkable degree and quality of unity as a people. Such strong unity is engendered primarily by their common love of, and pride in, their culture, their strong emphasis on development and modernization, and in their civilizational achievements in history and in modern times. It is also reinforced by their common identity with such ideals as love of freedom, respect for the individual, accountability of leadership and governance, the servanthood of rulers, religious tolerance and accommodation, hospitality towards all other peoples, tenacity in fighting for ideals, and a unique fixation, as a people, on progress in all facets of modern development and transformation.

However, the question is sometimes raised in modern times whether the Yorùbá did have a common national name for themselves in their early history – before modern times (specifically before the mid-19th century). The question how long in the past a people have had a common group name is, of itself, not a major or important question. Worldwide, many a nation in its early history had no common group name, though its members roughly recognized themselves as belonging to the group and as different from others beyond the group. However, in the context of the kinds of inter-ethnic relationships that are characteristic of Nigeria's political and intellectual life, the question about lack of an early group name is repeatedly raised about the

Yorùbá. The intention of such questions, often, is to cast some aspersion on Yorùbá claims and demonstrations of unity as a nation in Nigeria today. For instance, Idris S. Jimada, a Nupe author, in his book *The Nupe and the Origins and Evolution of the Yorùbá, c.1275-1897*, attaches interesting importance to the point. He wrote, “The name ‘Yorùbá’ was not an identity, for those who came later to be called Yorùbá, since the time of creation, or anytime before the mid-nineteenth century, as is so often misconceived nowadays”. Even though this point bears no real significance, I think the Yoruba people need to be given information that will mold their answers and attitudes to things like this.

It is known that from the middle of the 19th century, the rising literate class of the people now known as the Yorùbá began to popularize the name Yorùbá for their nation. But before then, did their nation have a common group name?

In the literature of the Atlantic trade (16th to early 19th century), we see some inclusive names for those members of this nationality that were involved in the trade, but “Yorùbá” was not one of such names. In some parts of the New World, some of them were identified with subgroup names such as Eo (Ọ̀yọ́) or Euba (Ègbá), etc. Others were identified in other places with group names coined from their cultural peculiarities – names such as Aku (coined from the phrase *ẹ́ kú* which occurs in most Yorùbá greetings), or Lucumi (apparently from the affectionate Yorùbá phrase *Olùkú mi*, my dear friend). Still another identifying group name in some parts of the New World was Nago (probably derived initially from the name of the far western Yorùbá subgroup, Ànàgó, from among whom some of the earliest Yorùbá entrants into the Atlantic slave trade probably originated).

Yet, we also find that the name Yorùbá existed all that time. In the present state of our knowledge, the basic outline of what we know about the name Yorùbá would be as follows: First, there is some evidence strongly indicating that the name Yorùbá was in use in parts of the West African interior in reference to a people before the 16th century. That is, though the name did not occur in the records of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the New World or in Europe or on the West African coast, it did exist in the West African interior – in the Upper Niger territories in the Western Sudan where the Yorùbá had been going in large numbers since about the 5th century AD as long-distance traders. A written use of the name in reference to the group appears in a book published in Timbuktu in the Songhai Empire in 1615, written by an indigenous Songhai Arabic scholar, Ahmed Baba – author of many books, probably the most prolific Black West African scholar before the 19th century. The name Yorùbá was very probably in use there for the group before Ahmed Baba’s time.

Secondly, it is known that, during the era of the greatness of the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire (from the 17th to the early 19th century), the name Yorùbá was used by many peoples in West Africa, as well as by some sections of the group themselves, as a sort of second subgroup name for their Ọ̀yọ́ subgroup. Thirdly, there is good evidence that the name became common in the Western Sudan in general as the name, definitely, for the people who now bear it, the large Yorùbá nation inhabiting the country south of the Middle Niger. The information for this is from the travel journal of the English explorer Hugh Clapperton, the first European to visit the interior of Yorùbáland. In 1825-6, Clapperton's team traversed Yorùbáland from Badagry on the coast, through Ègbádò and Ọ̀yọ́ towns, and reached Ọ̀yọ́-Ilé. They then crossed the River Niger and reached Sokoto. In their general travel through these interior countries, they first came in contact with the name Yorùbá. In Sokoto, Sultan Bello of Sokoto talked with Clapperton's team at length about the people whom he, Sultan Bello, called the Yorùbá, the people south of the Middle Niger who were regularly coming to do a lot of trade in Hausaland.

Following the Clapperton exploration, the name Yorùbá became gradually widely known among European traders and missionaries on the West African coast as the common name for the people who had been known in the Atlantic world by various other names for about three centuries. The name then spread in the hands of the Christian missionaries working on the coast and other parts of West Africa. Then it was received and spread by the freed slaves returning home from the New World and Sierra Leone, and thereafter by the generality of the growing class of literate Yorùbá – and then by all of the Yoruba people.

Thus, we do have hundreds of years of history of the existence of the name Yorùbá in the history of the Yorùbá nation. Still, it is important to ask the question whether there is any indigenous Yorùbá tradition concerning the name Yorùbá in the group's early history before the 19th century.

Some indigenous traditions answer that question in the affirmative. While doing research in Yorùbá history in the 1960s, I interviewed the then *Şaşere* of Ọ̀wọ́, Chief Adétulà, who was widely revered at the time as one of the oldest living literate Yorùbá. In fact, I was told about him at the Western Regional Ministry of Information in Ìbàdàn, and I went to interview him at his home in Ọ̀wọ́ a number of times in 1963-4. During one of those interviews, Chief Adétulà stated that Yorùbá was the original common name for all Yorùbá people. He added that he had never inquired into the meaning of the name, but that all the traditions known to him on the subject affirmed that Yorùbá was the common group name of the Yorùbá nation in the early eras of Yorùbá history, when the Yorùbá kingdoms were young and few and some more were still being founded – in times when Ife had been “all things

to all of us”, before Ọ̀yọ́ and Benin became notable kingdoms in the land, and before any white traders came to the Yorùbá and Benin coasts at all. (The first European explorers and traders came to the coast of Benin and Yorùbá around 1470).

In 1963 also, in the course of an interview of a group of Ìkìrùn chiefs and elders in Ìkìrùn (mostly about Ìkìrùn’s role in the 19th century Yorùbá wars), I learnt about an old local ruler, Ọba Adékanṣọ́lá, the Ọlọ́baagun of Ọbaagun, near Ìkìrùn. Ọba Adékanṣọ́lá was locally reputed to be much informed about Yorùbá history and traditions. Next morning, I went to interview the Ọlọ́baagun. He was a man of advanced age, mentally alert, well-travelled, and remarkably knowledgeable about Yorùbáland and Yorùbá traditions.

In the course of a long and richly informative interview, we came to the issue of the name Yorùbá. The Ọlọ́baagun stated that this name was the common name for the entire Yorùbá people from ancient times. He added that according to traditions that were still alive in some parts and among some traditional elite elements in Yorùbáland, the name was first applied to the early Yorùbá traders who used to go and trade in the countries of the Upper Niger (roughly modern Mali). Most of those early traders were from the early group of settlements in the Ife area – before all the settlements in that area merged together to form the town of Ile-Ife and the kingdom of Ife. The name, he said, became, in the marketplaces of the Upper Niger, the name for all traders who spoke various dialects of what we now call the Yorùbá language and who came from the same distant forest homeland in the southeast of the Upper Niger. Over time, the name came home with the traders. He added that by the time, later, when Arab traders began to come south across the Middle Niger to trade directly with Yorùbá people in the ancient settlements of the Ife area, Yorùbá people in general were already loosely known as Yorùbá or Yariba – and that that is why Yorùbá people call the Arabs Lárábáwá.

Asked to explain the point about Lárábáwá, he answered, “We were known as Yorùbá, but when the Arab traders came, they called us Yárúbáwá which means ‘Yorùbá people’ in their language. In our marketplaces, our people turned that around and called them Alárúbáwáor Lárábáwá. – meaning ‘the ones who say Yárúbáwá’, or ‘the ones who call us Yárúbáwá’. We still call the Arabs Lárábáwá today, and I have been told that we are the only people in the world who call them so”.

To elucidate the Ọlọ́baagun’s statements, the following is a basic outline of what we know about the history of the Trans-Saharan Trade as it related to what is now Yorùbáland. The trade was started, probably before the 4th century AD, by the Berbers of Northwest Africa, who traveled south across the Sahara Desert to trade with the Black African peoples of the territories of the Upper Niger, in the area that is now the Republic of Mali. There, a

trading town called Gao early arose, followed later by others like Djene and Timbuktu. Some Yorùbá traders (mostly from the early Ifè settlements) early found their way to Gao to trade, probably from as early as the 5th century. From the 7th century, following the rise of Islam in Arabia, Arabs came in large numbers to settle in Northwest Africa (the country of the Berbers), and many Arabs joined the Berbers in the trans-Saharan trade. Their entry expanded the trade greatly. More routes developed across the desert, and some of these crossed the Middle Niger directly into Yorùbáland, especially to the Ifè area whose many settlements were by then already widely famous as a center of trade and culture. The tradition about Arab traders in Yorùbáland as related by the Olóbaagun refers to this era of the coming of the Arab traders into Yorùbáland, in about the 8th century – before the founding of the city of Ilé-Ifè or any other Yorùbá city or kingdom.

Further asked whether he knew the meaning of the name Yorùbá, the Olóbaagun answered that he did not know. But he added that he was sure that it was some people in the marketplaces of the Upper Niger countries (probably the Berbers, or any of the indigenous Black peoples, or even the Arabs) that first called his people this name, and that it was certainly a word from a foreign language. Later that morning, the Olóbaagun added, “To the traders in the Upper Niger market towns like Gao, we were a people from a very distant forest country of the deep south. It is not improbable that, in the language of one of the peoples who met us in the marketplaces of the Upper Niger, the name Yorùbá meant ‘people from, or of, the distant southern forests’”.

In 2011, I interviewed a Yorùbá scholar of Islamic Studies, Alhaji Abdul-Fattah Délé Jámíù, on this question. Alhaji Jámíù had lived and studied in Saudi Arabia for years, and in 2011, he lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, where he was Chief Imam of a large mosque. He answered that as far as he knew, the Yorùbá people are the only people in the world who use the name Lárúbáwá for the Arabs. Asked how the Yorùbá came by the name Lárúbáwá, he answered that it could have been some sort of early Yorùbá twist of the name Arabiyah – the name of the Arabic language. But he added that there was however an ancient Yorùbá tradition on the subject also. According to that tradition, when the earliest Arab traders came to Yorùbáland, the Yorùbá were already known as Yorùbá or Yáríbà, and the Arabs called them the Yárúbáwá (meaning ‘Yoruba people’ in Arabic); and from that, the Yorùbá called the Arabs Alárúbáwá or Lárúbáwá (meaning ‘the folks who call us Yárúbáwá’).

There are, therefore, Yorùbá traditions about the presence of the name Yorùbá in some early (pre-19th century) era of Yorùbá history. And these indicate that, in that early era, the name was a general name for the whole national or language group.

A second question then arises. If all Yorùbá were known as Yorùbá that early, how did it happen that, at some later time, in the period covered by the greatness of the Òyó Empire in Yorùbá history, (the period roughly from the 17th century to the early 19th century), the name Yorùbá was used as a sort of second name for the Òyó subgroup only.

In the 1963 interview, the Olóbaagun answered that, from what he knew from the traditions, this probably happened in the following way. At the height of the greatness of the Òyó Empire (which we know to be from the 17th to the beginning of the 19th century), the overwhelming majority of the Yorùbá traders trading to the Upper Niger countries and most other parts of West Africa were Òyó. In many of those foreign lands, traders from all parts of Yorùbáland, including non- Òyó parts of Yorùbáland, came to be generally identified as subjects of the Alááfin. So, the two names Òyó and Yorùbá came to be used as interchangeable names. From that it developed that, among the Yorùbá people themselves, many subgroups got accustomed to using the name Yorùbá as a second subgroup name for the Òyó.

On the whole, therefore, the available evidence seems to indicate that the Yorùbá did have, and were widely identified by, an early common group name, the name Yorùbá, in much of the West African interior. The available evidence indicates that the name was originally given to them as a group by other peoples – but, there is nothing strange in that since, in the history of the world, many peoples or nations were given their group names by neighbours or by some other peoples with whom they came in contact.

The information most commonly cited as proof that the Yorùbá never had a common group name before the mid-19th century is found in an account of early life in the freed-slave community of Freetown in Sierra Leone. The British, after abolishing the slave trade in the first years of the 19th century, had ordered the British navy to stop and search any ships suspected of transporting slaves from Africa across the seas, and to set free any slaves found on such ships. The British had also established the Freetown Colony in Sierra Leone for settling persons from any part of Africa so set free on the high seas by the navy. Beginning from the 1820s, the Yorùbá were quite many among those who were recaptured on the high seas in this way and who were taken to the Freetown colony. These Yoruba arrivals were generally known in the colony as the Aku. The information concerning the name Yorùbá in the early years of the colony is contained in the statement by Sigismund Koelle (in his book, *Poliglotta Africana*, published in 1856). Koelle recorded that, while the name Yoruba was becoming popular along the West African coast, some Yorùbá freed slaves who were addressed as Yorùbá in the Freetown colony in its early years responded that they were not Yorùbá but Ìjẹ̀bú or Ìyàgbà or Ìjẹ̀sà. It is, of course, impossible for us today to say with certainty why

any particular Yorùbá freed slave of that time in Freetown would respond in this way. But, in general, it would seem understandable that, since it was the Ọ̀yọ́ that were widely referred to interchangeably as Ọ̀yọ́ or Yorùbá at that time among various Yorùbá subgroups, some non- Ọ̀yọ́ persons addressed as Yoruba might, for clarity, reject being so identified.

The situation had already changed considerably by the time Koelle's book was published in 1856, and that was due to wider knowledge of the report of Clapperton's 1825-6 Yorubaland exploration. The name Yorùbá was steadily catching on among European traders and Christian missionaries on the West African coast as the common name for the people who had been variously called Aku, Lukumi or Nago in the Atlantic world for some three centuries. The general impression was that while this people had been variously called Aku or Lukumi or Nago in the Atlantic Slave trade, they had in fact been long known by their neighbours in the West African interior as Yorùbá.

In major Yorùbá towns like Abẹ̀òkúta, Lagos and Ìbàdàn where European Christian missionaries had been establishing churches and schools since the 1840s, the schools were soon identifying all Yorùbá -speaking people as simply "Yorùbá". When the Christian missionary house in Abẹ̀òkúta started a Yorùbá-language newspaper in 1859, they still named it *Ìwé Ìròhìn fún àwọn Ará Ègbá àti Yorùbá* (Newspaper for the Ègbá and Yorùbá). But more and more of the growing school literature of the time was already using the name "Yorùbá" in a more inclusive manner. The growth of literature in the Yorùbá language in the course of the last decades of the 19th century advanced the process immensely. And by the last decade of the century, there was not much of a question left among literate Yorùbá, as well as among Yorùbá returnees from the Americas and Sierra Leone, about the name Yorùbá as the group name for all the people speaking the one group language and its numerous dialects. The name Yorùbá thus stood forth, while names such as Aku, Lukumi and Nago dropped away. And it does seem almost certain that the reason why this change occurred so quickly and so seamlessly all over Yorùbáland soon afterwards is that the name Yorùbá had some root and resonance in the consciousness of Yorùbá people in general. Of course, until the 1890s, some writers still continued to refer to the Ọ̀yọ́ as "Yorùbá proper", but that was soon to fall away.

We must, in conclusion, repeat that the question whether any people had a common group name early in their history is not of much importance. Probably most of the peoples of the world had no common group names for long in their earliest history. All over tropical Africa, very many peoples today bear group names that they were given (by European colonial officials or by neighbours) in the course of the 20th century. The important question is whether a group is recognizable as a group, and as different from neighboring

groups – culturally, linguistically, by their own perception, and by their neighbors' perception. And historians of West African history would agree that the people now known as the Yorùbá have been one of the most prominent nationalities in West Africa for thousands of years. They seem to have been known as Yorùbá among some of their neighbors in the West African interior long before that name became known in the Atlantic world.

Some non-Yoruba Nigerians are claiming that it was their own ethnic nation, such as the Hausa or Fulani, that gave the name Yoruba to the Yoruba nation, but there is absolutely no evidence confirming such an assertion. Some are also concocting derogatory meanings for the name Yoruba, apparently in order to make the Yoruba people ashamed of their nation's name – and this is very obviously something from their hostile attitudes to, and hostile perceptions of, the Yoruba people today. There is no evidence at all that the Hausa and the Yoruba people were hostile to each other in their early history. In fact, all the evidence that we have about early times is that the Yoruba and Hausa were very closely related, and that there was much trading between their two countries. Such closeness bred, among the Hausa, some myths and traditions to the effect that some Hausa communities (such as Gobir) were originally Yoruba settlements. It was not until the Fulani came with the Jihad in the early 19th century that any strain of hostility showed up between Hausaland and Yorubaland, and that strain of hostility was never between the Yoruba and the Hausa but between the Yoruba and the Fulani. Yoruba peoples' prolific traditions have nothing about hostility between Yoruba and Hausa.

Ultimately, what is important about a nation is not its name but its record of contributions to human civilization. On such a basis, the Yoruba nation has a very great deal to be proud of, and the name Yoruba deserves to ring out proudly on the earth. My message to every Yoruba person: Your nation's Yoruba name is a great and noble name in the world; bear it proudly everywhere, and, by your conduct, always strive to enhance its greatness and nobility.