

Yoruba Myths — A Sociologist's Interpretation

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Myths are virtually the only source of Yoruba history for the centuries before the arrival of Europeans. Early travellers and missionaries recorded their impressions during the nineteenth century and introduced writing so that the local people might document events themselves. For the centuries before this archaeology should be able to furnish valuable evidence but, as yet, little attempt has been made to unearth these secrets and the results of the excavations already made suggest that the writing of Yoruba history by these methods will be a long and tedious process. A comparative study of customs and ceremonies, particularly those relating to the installation and burial of *obas* and chiefs, might shed light on the direction of early Yoruba immigrants but such a study, too, remains to be made. Myths thus remain as the all important source of Yoruba history. This is a dangerous situation since myths may be used, as they have, in fact, been used in other countries, to assert the superiority of one set of people over another; such myths are harmful. Myths cannot be taken at their face value as accurate recordings of Yoruba history; the historian who would use them must analyze them carefully. Scholars of literature and linguistics have illustrated how European ballads may be dated and their migration traced; myths might be so treated. This essay is a sociologist's interpretation of Yoruba myths, given in the belief that it might clarify the use of these myths as historical evidence.

To the sociologist myths explain the present and not the past. Professor Fortes, in writing of the Tallensi of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, said 'All these myths of origin become intelligible when it is realized that they are nothing more than formulations of the contemporary scheme of political and ceremonial relationships.'²¹ 'Tale myths and legends counterfeit history; they do not document it. They are a part of Tale social philosophy projected into the past because the people think of their social orders as continuous and persistent handed down from generation to generation. A myth or legend postulates a beginning of what has existed thus ever since.'²² Such viewpoints lead many sociologists to deny the value of myths as historical evidence, but these men have often worked with myths containing little that seems credible at the present day. Yoruba myths are more complex and more concrete; they contain a mass of detail that should be carefully sifted. If the sociologist outlines the functions of these myths and the methods that have been used to preserve them, the historian may be able to see in what directions distortion

21. M. Fortes, *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*, 1945, p. 23.

22. *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

is most likely to have taken place and to assess better their value as historical evidence.

The Yoruba traditional political system for which these myths act as a charter consists of a divine king, the *oba*, ruling a town composed of a number of separate lineages. The lineages are independent of one another, each endeavoring to maintain its identity and autonomy; but the government of the town, consisting of the *oba* and his chiefs, has jurisdiction over all the affairs of the town. Myths help to maintain this balance between the lineage and the government of the town. The myths which we shall discuss here are, firstly, those concerning the origin of the Yoruba people; secondly, those dealing with the foundation of Yoruba towns, and thirdly, those of the lineages which describe the arrival of their founders in the town.

The Yoruba Myths of Origin

The myths telling of the origin of the Yoruba people may be divided into two groups—creation stories and stories of conquest and migration. Both are well known.

The creation myths tell of *Olorun* letting a chain down to Earth, then covered with water, down which came the first man holding some earth, a cock and a palm nut. The cock scratched the earth to produce dry land, the palm nut produced a tree with sixteen branches which were the sixteen Yoruba *obas*. The conquest myth, popularized by the Rev. Samuel Johnson, tells of *Oduduwa* originating in the east, of his journey to *Ile-Ife* and of his later move to *Oyo-Ile*.²³ In this version, the children of *Oduduwa* were seven in number and these became the first Yoruba *obas*. Many local versions of each of these myths exist. Stories of sixteen *obas* seem most common in *Ife* and the eastern parts of Yoruba country; sixteen is a Yoruba number which recurs in other circumstances. Myths telling of seven *obas* on the other hand seem common in *Oyo*; the same number occurs in the Hausa myths of the seven true Hausa kingdoms and the seven 'bastard' kingdoms, among which are the Yoruba and *Nupe*.

These myths, in all their variations, create a genealogy whereby the Yorubas are descended from one man; the children of this man became the founders of the sub-tribes and their rulers. The Yorubas are thus one people and each of the sub-tribes—the *Oyos*, *Ifes*, *Ijesas*, *Egbas*, and so on—is also one people. (This relationship did not prevent war from breaking out between the different groups.) It is this unity which these myths seek to preserve. Perhaps they relate to an earlier time during which the Yoruba kingdoms did, in fact, acknowledge one ruler. It is not difficult to find inconsistencies in these

23. S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 1937, pp. 3–5.

myths. They make no mention of an aboriginal population which many of the conquest stories presume to have existed. They are not supported by lineage myths; for instance, in an Oyo town, elders may claim that their own lineage founders came originally from Šaki, Owu, or even Ekiti. The people of these towns are thus quite cosmopolitan. However, the myth that they are all Oyo and that the Oyo are descended from the Aláfin reinforces their allegiance to the Aláfin as their ruler.

Myths tell of other countries with which people have contact; they rarely mention places which have no significance for their narrators. Is it thus a coincidence that the seven kings named in the Oyo version of the myths of origin are those of Oyo itself, of Benin, which perhaps had a common frontier with Oyo at some periods, and of the neighboring kingdoms of the Oyo Empire which may have been tributary to Oyo at one time? Those kingdoms which do not seem to have had contact with Oyo, such as those of the Ondos, Iješas and Ijebus, are often said to have been founded by slaves or victims of sacrifice. The Ife versions of the myth, which give sixteen obas, name several Ekiti rulers but usually neglect those of Shabe and Ketu in the extreme west. There are today far more than sixteen obas and there is considerable rivalry for inclusion in the list; the variations in the list are perhaps an indication of the prominence of the rulers at different periods. These myths help to establish for the people of one kingdom their relationship with neighboring kingdoms; they usually emphasize their kinship with the nearest ones, perhaps giving them that status of senior brother or otherwise stressing their superiority, and making the more distant kingdoms unrelated by birth, but not associated through some low status such as slavery.

The myths relating to Oduduwa are preserved, in the first place, by the priests at the shrines of this deity; but not every town has such a shrine. These stories of origin have no other official custodian and are known to every Yoruba. They are handed on from the elders to the young people, perhaps embellished with fresh details. For a man to relate myths which did not place his own ruler and kingdom in a position of some prominence would be tantamount to treason. No people have stories of slave ancestry for themselves. There seems to be nothing to prevent these myths from being altered whenever a change occurs in the political relationship between kingdoms.

Town Myths

The history of a town is the history of its rulers; those who relate the myths seem to have no concept of 'social and economic history' but tell simply how the oba arrived in the town and of the reigns and achievements of

his successors. The myths of the individual lineage which settled later in the town are not incorporated.

The myths follow a common pattern in spite of their variance in detail. They tell how the *oba* was a titled prince in the court of Oduduwa at Ile-Ife and that when the city became too full, or when Oduduwa became old, he sent his children to found their own kingdoms. The route of their wanderings is usually remembered but only, in any detail within the present kingdom. Sometimes the myths abound with tales of supernatural happenings but each such event is seen to give its name to a settlement or a chief met on the route. On reaching the site of his present town the *oba* either found it uninhabited or met people there who readily accepted his rule as a result of his royal birth. Conquest is rarely mentioned and a common euphemism to suggest it seems to be that the existing ruler of the town invited the conqueror to assume responsibility for civil and political matters while he devoted his whole attention to the town rituals.

The function of these town myths is to sanction the position of the *oba* as the divine king of his people; they contain elements which are jealously preserved and may be regarded as the essential parts of the myth. It is necessary that an *oba* should be able to trace his descent from Oduduwa; without this he would have no right to the beaded crowns and other symbols of royalty. The Yoruba *oba* had, in the traditional political system, no means of enforcing his commands, he had in most cases no personal army and he was selected by the chiefs of this town. Only by emphasizing his divinity could his rule be assured. A direct descent from Oduduwa is deemed preferable to an indirect descent through other rulers. Yet if the myths of towns through which an *oba* claims to have passed are themselves examined they would suggest that several Yoruba *obas* are not descended directly from Ile-Ife, as they claim, but from the other rulers such as the Alāfin or the *Oba* of Benin who, in turn, trace their own descent from Oduduwa.

Conquest is rarely mentioned in the myths; it seems essential that the *oba* should claim the right to rule by virtue of his royal descent and not the military power of his ancestors. Town myths often fail to mention that the site was inhabited before the arrival of the *oba*. The hill spirits which guard the safety and prosperity of the Yoruba town are usually served by the descendants of its founder; the *oba* must appear as such a descendant and thus responsible for the well-being of his town. It may be not accidental that the thrones of *obas* who are thought to have gained power through conquest and who are not responsible for the town deities appear to have been less secure than others in the past century.

Just as it must appear that the *oba* was founder of the town, so, within the kingdom, the metropolitan town must usually have been settled before

subordinate towns. The ruler of a subordinate town may not use symbols of royalty although he may claim to have been an independent ruler before the arrival of his *oba*. The subordinate status of the towns through which the *oba* passed to this present town is explained in the myths of the metropolitan town. A kingdom can only have one *oba*; subordinate rulers must renounce any claims to such a status. The subordinate towns usually retain their original myths, but any attempt to assert them, and thus threaten the integrity of the kingdom, was, in the past, met by raiding and possible destruction of the town.

These myths of the origin of the town and its ruler are the common property of the townspeople; any person may relate them. They do not appear to be preserved in any formalized setting which is recited at certain ceremonies. Their details are, however, preserved in other contexts. Members of the non-ruling lineage jealously preserve any reference to their own ancestors for these sanction their own relation to the *oba* and to the government of the town. When an *oba* is installed he often re-enacts the final part of the journey of his ancestor to the town and ceremonies often take place in the compound of the lineage of the indigenous inhabitants of the site. Along the royal route are often shrines at which annual sacrifices must be made, each such action recalling the myth which describes the original purpose of the shrine. It is for these reasons that the route is only remembered within the kingdom. Chiefs of the town often have ceremonial duties at the installation of burial of the *oba*, to which reference is made in the myths.

Where no ceremony is extant which supports the details given in a myth, variations occur. Most obvious is the wide range between the description of the subordination of a subject town given in the metropolitan town and the myths of independence given in the subordinate town itself. Neighboring but independent towns may have differing versions of each others' origins. In such cases, and in all others too, the myths must not detract from the divinity of the *oba* as ruler of his town and kingdom. Some young literate men of the present day who have collected the myths of their towns and attempted to write an objective history have been afraid to publish anything which suggests that their *oba* had an origin other than the one claimed in the myths, or that some subordinate towns had, in fact, been independent and had had their own *oba* in the past. Such assertions would, in the eyes of the *oba* and the people of his own town, be treasonable.

Lineage Myths

If the myths of each lineage in every Yoruba town were collected, the mass of detail resulting would surely aid the historian in his task. These myths tell

how and why the lineage founder left his former home and travelled to the present site and how, on arrival there, he was welcomed by the *oba* and chiefs and given land and, perhaps, a title.

It is usually known from what lineage in the original home town the lineage founder came; very often he is said to have come from a ruling lineage. Such a descent today gives prestige and will be remembered through the praise songs of the lineage, but it does not affect the relationship of the lineage to the *oba*. Lineages in a town are not ranked according to the degree of royalty of their founders. The reason for the migration is always remembered. Sometimes the lineage founder fled when his town was destroyed; sometimes he had fought for his father's title and, when it had passed to a younger brother, left rather than submit to his junior. Other reasons given are the migration to forest country to be cured of impotency, or the invitation by an *oba* to a skilled magician or craftsman to settle in his town. In all cases, it is stressed that the migrant came to his present site of his own volition, being impressed perhaps by the power and justice of the ruler of the town, and that the *oba* welcomed and promised land in return for the support of the immigrants. Often the lineage founder gave or received from the *oba* a daughter in marriage, which link cemented the relationship between the two lineages. These are the events remembered in most detail. The lineage elders today cannot often tell how the lineage founder came to exist in the town from which their own founders came; in most cases they have no contact with the parent lineage, it being in another kingdom. They cannot tell with much detail the route of their migration to their present town; sometimes site at which halts were made are named but cannot be located. The date at which the migration took place is usually said to be in the reign of the first *oba*; this myth is sometimes compatible with that of the *oba* himself. Such an origin is thought to give added prestige however, and it is often possible to find an alternative myth giving an independent origin in another town.

The function of these myths differ from those of the *obas*. Those of the latter were concerned to demonstrate the origin of the ruler from Ile-Ife. For the lineage, its origins is largely irrelevant; each lineage in a town is independent of its neighbor and of equal status. That founded by a royal prince from Ile-Ife is not superior to that founded by a man without a title from the smallest town of a kingdom. The royal prince, however, probably arrived with many followers and this would have enhanced his claim to a chieftaincy title which the humble immigrant is not likely to have received. The lineage myths stress the contractual relationship between the lineage members and their *oba*. At the installation of an *oba*, the new ruler promises to rule well and is assured of the support of his people. The *oba* is invariably chosen from the ruling

lineage, often being born to an *o*ba on the throne, but the final selection remains with the chiefs of the town.

Each lineage in a town has its own farmland clearly demarcated; it may also have its own craft occupation. It is thus an economic unit as well as a social unit. Its male members live in a single compound and the lineage head settles all petty civil disputes amongst the lineage members. Each lineage owes its allegiance independently to its *o*ba; there is little formal relationship between lineages. The lineage founder was given land and perhaps a hereditary title on his arrival in the town; these are the corporate property of the lineage members. If they are not used properly they may be withdrawn and given to other lineages. Similarly, the hereditary duties performed at ceremonies involving the *o*ba bind the *o*ba and his subjects; these duties may also be withdrawn as a punishment.

The lineage myth is the property of the lineage members. Often a myth may be well known in the town, but it may be related only by the lineage head usually in the presence of other elders to ensure that it is told correctly. These myths are not told in any formalized pattern, but most of the details are preserved in the praise songs of the lineage and of its more famous members, past and present. These are known to the drummers who recite them whenever they meet a prominent man in the town. They often contain archaic words and events are referred to briefly or by allusion. Other details of the myths are recalled through the worship of the lineage deities and ancestors.

Conflicting versions of these myths often occur when two parties strive for the hereditary title within the lineage; the version which persists will be that of the successful candidate although his success may be due in small part to the legitimacy of his claim.

The Myths Today

The functions of these myths remain but little changed today. There are several factors, however, which suggest that the traditional myths are being altered more rapidly than in the past. These are merely listed for there is no space for a full discussion of them.

At the present time, it is becoming increasingly possible for a subordinate town to gain independence or for a subordinate ruler to become a crowned *o*ba. Myths appear which support these claims; one can often watch them growing. In some cases rival versions exist, both with the same function, and only after some time does one become supreme.

In recording a myth, it is essential to be certain that it is, in fact, the traditional myth current in the town. With the increased mobility of people, it is probable that those who travel will incorporate myths learnt elsewhere into

those of their town. Literates often tell those read in books in preference to those related by their elders. Christians and Moslems tend to identify local heroes with biblical characters or to trace origins from Canaan or Mecca. These processes undoubtedly took place in the past as well as the present, but by recognizing them one may at least eliminate some present distortion.

In the past, the myths were related by the elders who were often involved in the rituals and ceremonies mentioned in them; they were not troubled if details conflicted or seemed improbable. The modern literate chronicler is inclined to edit them omitting the supernatural, filling gaps and ironing out the inconsistencies.

To the historian who would use these myths, the sociologist would say two things. Examine the function of the myths; for those details which are essential to the function will be subordinate to it and hence liable to distortion; conversely those details which are merely incidental may remain unchanged. Examine the methods by which the myths are transmitted; those preserved in ritual or in praise songs are likely to have greater continuity in unaltered forms.