

**YORUBA ETHNIC GROUPS OR A YORUBA ETHNIC GROUP?
A REVIEW OF THE PROBLEM OF ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION**

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In spite of the upsurge of interest in anthropological studies in the last half century, ethnologists and kindred scientists have not been able to agree on what criteria to use for identifying an ethnic group. As M. Moerman¹ pointed out, "the delimitation of ethnic entities is especially problematic in all parts of the world which are continuously inhabited but not divided into either sharp ecological zones or strong durable states". Under such conditions, it becomes quite difficult to use "objective characteristics (of) language and cultural practice for determining where one entity stops and another, its neighbour, begins". Naroll² gave a list of criteria which he thinks are useful in this type of exercise. These are, trait distributions, territorial contiguity, political organization, language, ecological adjustment and local community structure. Commenting on this, Leach³ rightly pointed out that ethnic groups cannot be described taxonomically like objects with lists of defining characteristics. Traits that may adequately identify one group may not be applicable to another.

What this boils down to really is that ethnographic traits such as Naroll listed, may not be adequate to determine whether some collections of communities form an ethnic group or not. What appears most legitimate is the consciousness among the people and their neighbours.

- 1 M. Moerman, "Ethnic identification in a complex civilization. Who are the Lue" *American Anthropologists* Vol. 67, 1965 p. 1215.
- 2 R. Naroll, "On Unit Classification" *Current Anthropology* vol. 15 no. 4 1964, p. 299.
- 3 E.R. Leach, "Comment on Naroll's Article" *Current Anthropology* vol. 15, no. 4, 1964 p. 299.

Indeed one is bound to accept Frank Bessac's suggestion, that if a collection of people "share a common, self applied appellation, have a sense of common identity, and share a belief in a common heritage"⁴ then for all intents and purposes they should be regarded as an ethnic group. While this broad-based definition of the term "ethnic group" may be useful when dealing with small groups made up of a few hundred members, it is not easy to adopt when dealing with larger groups.

One such group is the Yoruba of West Africa. Numbering about fifteen million, their homeland covers Southwestern Nigeria, Southern parts of Benin Republic and Central Togo. They share contiguous boundaries with other large West African groups such as the Edo, Nupe, Borgu, Adja and Ewe. Interactions between the Yoruba and these other groups have in some cases blurred what one may regard as the "standard Yoruba" cultural characteristics.

Furthermore, Yorubaland exhibits many geographical features. From a narrow swampy coastal belt in the south, it stretches inland, rising gently northwards to about 300 metres above sea level. Rainfall decreases from the coast inwards, and so does the vegetation very from swampy to wooded forest, finally merging into savannah. Over the wide area, there are variations in local customs. In this regard, many sub-units with peculiar local customs and dialects have been identified. The major ones include: the Yagba, Owo, Akoko, Ekiti, Igbomina, Ijesa, Ife, Ilaje and Ondo in the East; the Oyo, Owu, Egbado Awori and Ijebu in the Centre; and the Sabe, Anago, Idaisa, Manigri, Isa and Ana in the West.

While some writers refer to the whole group as a single unit, others on account of this differentiation have expressed some scepticism about the ethnic cohesion of the sub-groups especially with regard to those in the western and eastern extremities⁵.

Indeed ordinarily, most of the Yoruba sub-groups have distinguishing characteristics which may qualify each of them for an ethnic group. For example an ethnic group is a category of description and identification. Each Yoruba sub-group identifies itself and is identified by others by a specific name. In addition, each sub-group is a territorial unit with diacritical features such as facial markings and dialects. The members of each sub-group perceive themselves as a group distinguishable from others. This sub-ethnic identification was particularly strong because most of the sub-groups actually coincided with an independent political unit; and if one accepts Naroll's suggestion that political centralization is a major distinguishing characteristic

4 F. Bessac, "Comment on Naroll's article" *Current Anthropology*. vol. 5, no. 4, 1964 pp. 283-294.

5 G.J.A Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, London. 1966. Pp. 17-22; N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan University Press, 1970 p. 21.

of an ethnic group, most of the Yoruba sub-groups will qualify as ethnic groups. The Yoruba were not in historic times organized into a single political unit. There are traditions of a time when there existed a socio-political organization under the leadership of Ile-Ife⁶. These traditions certainly refer to a period of remote antiquity and belong to the realm of myth.

The popular Yoruba traditions identify between seven and sixteen major kingdoms each of which was politically independent. On the bases of these traditions, it has been argued that until very recently, the consciousness of forming a single ethnic group was absent among the various sub-groups and that in pre-colonial times the tendency was for each sub-group to emphasize its identity. It has also been argued that until the second half of the 19th century when the christian missionaries began to reduce the Yoruba language into writing, there was no collective name for all the sub-groups; and that the term Yoruba itself originally applied only to the Oyo sub-group⁷.

This paper traces the development of these views and attempts to examine if there is any justification to regard all the Yoruba sub-groups as constituting a single ethnic group before the 19th century. It also examines whether it is anachronistic to refer to the non-Oyo sub-groups as Yoruba before the 1840's.

In 1853, the Reverend Sigismund Whilem Koelle published a book in which he declared that the term 'Yoruba' was a misnomer for the repatriates called 'Aku' in Sierra-Leone⁸. This view was later amplified three or four decades later by the Reverend Samuel Johnson, the foremost Yoruba local historian, himself an 'Aku' of Oyo descent⁹. Apparently to buttress his conviction on the issue, Johnson, wrote about the origins and early development of some of the Yoruba sub-groups and discussed the practices associated with each of them¹⁰. Various scholars have since written to vindicate Johnson's stand and to demonstrate that the cultural variation over the wide area of Yorubaland makes it difficult to generalize about the social and political systems of the Yoruba¹¹. It is to further emphasize

6 E.B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* Longman 1962, p. 15.

7 J.F. Ajayi and R.S. Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the 19th century* Cambridge 1971, Pp. 1-2, J.A. Atanda, *The New Oyo Empire Indirect Rule and Change in Western Nigeria* Longman, 1973, p. 4; R.C. Law, *The Oyo Empire. 1600-1836*. Clarendon, Oxford 1977 Pg. 5-7

8 S.W. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana: Or a Comparative Vocabulary of nearly 300 words and phrases in more than one hundred distinct Languages* London, 1963 edition p. 5.

9 J.F. Ajayi "Samuel Johnson: The Historian of the Yoruba" *Nigeria Magazine* No. 81 (June) 1964 p. 142-144.

10 S. Johnson, *The History of the Yoruba*. Lagos, CHS, 1921. Pg. 15-25.

11 D. Forde, *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples of Southwestern Nigeria* London 1951; P.C. Lloyd, 'Agnatic and Cognatic Descent Among the Yoruba' *MAN* (NS) no. 14, 1966 pp. 484-500.

this that some scholars have written that Yorubaland was never ethnically homogenous, despite appearances to the contrary.

There is evidence to demonstrate that the consciousness of belonging to a common cultural group was very strong among the Yoruba sub-groups; and that the various sub-groups were known by many collective names of which the term 'Yoruba' was one.

The first evidence of a collective name comes from Reverend Koelle himself. At times, Koelle used the term 'Nagun' in place of 'Aku' for the Yoruba in Sierra-Leone. In the light of his rejection of the term 'Yoruba', Koelle would appear to find the term 'Nagun' appropriate as a collective term. His recordings in fact give the impression that there were many such names and he was very confident that "the historical names by which these numerous tribes (i.e. the Yoruba sub-groups) are united in one nation may possibly be discovered in one or another of the different appellations by which surrounding nations call the Aku"¹².

One of such 'appellations' is 'Anago' which appears to be the same as Koelle's 'Nagun'. Extant traditions in various parts of Yorubaland indicate that the term was current during the 18th century though its use appears to ante-date that period. The original meaning of the term has been lost, and it is not now known how and when it was derived. There are suggestions that it was used originally for the language of the people. It is certain, however, that by the beginning of the 19th century, it had come to be used as a term both for the Yoruba people and for the language they speak.

Although the use of the term has died out in Yorubaland itself, it is still in use among the non-Yoruba in the Republics of Benin and Togo where the Yoruba are still referred to as 'Nago'¹³.

Among the Adja-speaking people for instance, priests who use the Yoruba language in their rituals and keepers of deities of Yoruba origins are generally referred to as 'Nagonu' a term derived from their intimate knowledge of the Yoruba language. The speculation that 'Anago' was first used as a group name for the Yoruba by their western neighbours¹⁴, although very plausible and supported by current traditions is nevertheless not wholly acceptable. The term 'Anago' is linguistically older than 'Nago' which is the Fon rendition of it. It could therefore be suggested that the Fon themselves borrowed the term from somewhere.

One other term also used by the Yoruba in diaspora was 'Olukumi' which appeared frequently in European writings of the 18th and early 19th

12 S.W. Koelle, *Polyglotta African op. cit.* p. 5.

13 O.J. Igwe and O.B. Yai "The Yoruba - speaking Peoples of Dahomey and Togo" *Yoruba* vol. I: i, 1973, p. 4

14 P. Mercier, *Civilisation du Bénin*, Paris, 1962; P. Morton - Williams, "The Oyo Yoruba and the Atlantic Trade" *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* 3; i, 1964 Pp. 25-45.

centuries. This term which was derived from a common Yoruba term meaning 'my friend' is still in use among the eastern neighbours of the Yoruba, and was probably the 'appellation' which the coastal peoples used for the Yoruba. In Brazil and Cuba where descendants of Yoruba slaves have preserved aspect of Yoruba culture, the term 'Lucumi' is current and is used for all sub-groups¹⁵. This indicates that its use pre-dated the shipment into the Americas and the West Indies in the 17th and 18th centuries.

There is hardly any doubt that the term 'Olukumi' and its variants 'Ulcumi', 'Lukumi', etc., refer to the same group of people we now call Yoruba. Early European visitors to West Africa remarked that the language of commerce in that part of West Africa which later acquired a notoriety for its thriving trade in human cargoes was 'Olukumi'.

William Bosman, one of the slave traders of the 18th century, described the area of 'Ulcumi' as "the country between Arder (Allada) and Benin towards the North East and thus does not reach the coast"¹⁶. Another European Slave trader, William Snelgrave¹⁷, located the country of 'Lucamee' in the core of Yorubaland "towards the north east of Dahomey". Of course, Snelgrave's identification of 'Ioes' (Oyo) as distinct from 'Ulcamee' or 'Ulkama' on the map attached to his book suggests that there were two mutually exclusive peoples in the area of present-day Yorubaland. But Snelgrave was preceded by two other visitors whose accounts show that the two terms, 'Oyo' and 'Olukumi' could be synonymous, but that one was of more inclusive reference than the other. Olfert Dapper's 17th century account clearly located 'Ulkami or Ulkuma' as occupying what is now Yorubaland¹⁸. Later in the 1730's, John Barbot was to talk of a 'remote inland nation, which I suppose to be Oyeo and Ulkami'¹⁹.

A third 'appellation' that became more popular than either Anago or Olukumi is the current term 'Yoruba'. The etymology of the term or the context in which it was first used is not known today. Indeed until some concrete data come out, the scope of the original applicability will remain a subject of controversy.

On the basis of the evidence now at our disposal the term appears to have had an origin external to Yorubaland and as wide an applicability as the other two terms.

15 W.R. Bascom, "Yoruba Acculturation in Cuba" in *Les Afro-Américains Memories de L'IFAN*. Dakar, 1952 Pp. 163-167

16 P. Verger, *Trade Relations Between the Bight of Benin and Bahia, 17th-18th century*, Ibadan University Press, 1976 p. 105

17 W. Snelgrave, *A New and Accurate Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade* Franck Cass, 1967, edition p. 89.

18 See translation by John Ogiby, *Africa, Being an Accurate Description of the Regions of the Aegypt, Barbary, Lybia etc.*, Lon 1670.

19 J. Barbot, *A Description of the Coast of North and South Guinea*, London, 1735 p. 352.

The major evidence that it was used for all the Yoruba sub-groups comes from the work of Samuel Johnson himself.

Reverend Johnson's use of the term 'Yoruba' was not restricted to the Oyo. He made a clear distinction between 'Yarribah and Katunga' which were terms used by the Hausa for Yoruba and Oyo respectively²⁰. His later use of the term 'Yoruba proper' for the Oyo, Ibarapa, Ibolu and Epo who were in the core of the *Alaafin's* kingdom²¹, indicates that he clearly distinguished between the two terms²². Furthermore, giving the boundaries of Yorubaland, Johnson wrote: "... to the immediate west of the River Niger (below the confluence) and south of the Quorra - having Dahomey on the West, and the Bight of Benin to the South. It is roughly speaking between latitude 6° and 9° north and longitude 2°3' and 6°30' east"²³. This is a fairly accurate delimitation of the area occupied by virtually all the Yoruba sub-groups. It contrasts sharply with Johnson's later delimitation of the 'utmost limits' of the Oyo empire²⁴. In this latter delimitation, Johnson included not only all the Yoruba but also parts of the territories of the Fon, Bariba, Nupe and Edo.

It is not likely that Johnson gave the former boundaries to boost the image of the *Alaafin* of Oyo for he included the easter sub-groups who were definitely never under the imperial aegis of Oyo, but left out the people of Dahomey, the Bariba and the Nupe who, to Johnson's own knowledge, were at one time or the other subjected to the *Alaafin* even though they were not Yoruba.

It could also not be argued that Samuel Johnson being a product of the missionaries possibly adopted the missionary connotation of the term 'Yoruba' current in the second half of the 19th century.

At the turn of the century when the term first appeared in European accounts it had a connotation similar to that used by the missionaries from the 1840's.

This speculation is supported by the fact that the term first appeared in Arabic sources and in European accounts based on information from the Hausa country²⁵. It was probably the Hausa who first gave the name 'Yarribah' to their Yoruba-speaking neighbours. Since the Oyo were the sub-group the Hausa came most frequently in contact with, the name easily became synonymous with 'Oyo'. This was aided by the facts that Oyo was the largest sub-group and that its political influence extended to many

20 S. Johnson, *The History op. cit.*, p. xix

21 *ibid* p. xxii

22 cf. R.C. Law, *The Oyo Empire op. cit.*, p. 16.

23 S. Johnson, *The History op. cit.* p. xix

24 *Ibid* p. 179

25 Such as H. Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa from the Bight of Benin to Socatto* Frank Cas, 1966. Edition p. 4.

other sub-groups. It is not certain, however, that the Hausa had in mind the Oyo; there is no evidence that a Hausaman would have referred to a man from a non-Oyo sub-group by any other name than 'Yarribah'.

Within Yorubaland itself, little knowledge of the name was probably had until the latter part of the 19th century. A few non-Oyo traders who frequented the northern Yoruba markets might have heard constant references to 'Yoruba' by the Hausa and other non-Yoruba ethnic groups; but the use of their respective sub-group's name persisted in inter-personal communication. It is even not certain that the Oyo themselves preferred the name "Yarribah" to their sub-group's name. Even though they were aware of its use, it was not popular among them until the closing years of the 19th century. Evidence from contemporary written accounts would in fact suggest that the term 'Yoruba' remained for long only in the dictionary of those who invented it.

What popularized its use was the political development in Yorubaland from the early years of the 19th century when interactions among the Yoruba and their northern neighbours increased²⁶. It was then that most Yoruba outside Oyo probably heard the term 'Yoruba' for the first time. At this time, the wars going on in many parts of the Yoruba country engendered local patriotism among the people. Each sub-group was trying to assert its political supremacy; consequently, each took pride in its own identity. Thus when the bulk of the non-Oyo heard the term 'Yoruba' being used for them, they rejected it as a 'foreign' name. In fact it was only in the closing years of the century when the Europeans insisted on the term as a common name for all the sub-groups and referred to the *Alaafin* as king of the "Yoruba"²⁷ that the Oyo themselves began to take pride in the name.

The name 'Aku' which Koelle cherished so much and which Robin Law accepts as the first 'common name' had, like the terms Anago, Olukumi and Yoruba, an origin external to Yorubaland, since it was coined by the non-Yoruba repatriates in Sierra-Leone. It is not likely that if the different 'Aku' groups had been in their respective homes, the wide applicability of the name would have been obvious. Christopher Fyfe²⁸, the historian of Sierra-Leone, indeed observed that as soon as the repatriates returned to their home country, they shunned the name 'Aku' and re-adopted the names of their various sub-groups.

One observation that can be made from all these 'foreign' names is that the differences that existed among the Yoruba sub-groups were not realized by their non-Yoruba neighbours or by early European visitors.

26 J.F. Ajayi "The Aftermath of the fall of Old Oyo" in J.F. Ajayi & M. Crowder (eds.) *History of West Africa* vol. II, Longman 1979 Pp. 129-166.

27 J.A. Atanda, *The New Oyo Empire op. cit.* p. 5

28 C.A. Fyfe, *A History of Sierra-Leone*, London 1962.

This does not, however, mean that differences never existed. The Yoruba themselves see minor differences in the culture of one sub-group and the other.

Various studies on Yoruba kinship system have shown that though the sub-groups differ significantly in some aspects, on the broad outline they are homogenous. But this homogeneity is not often visible to the hazy observer. Thus Peter Lloyd claims that the Ondo sub-group exhibits cognatic and agnatic descents while the Oyo exhibit the cognatic system and the Ekiti and Ijebu the agnatic system²⁹. Donald Bender on the other hand argued that the differences highlighted by Lloyd were not as prominent and that in any case, the Ondo strictly follow the agnatic system³⁰. Certainly, in spite of any variation that may exist, kinship terms are basically the same among all the sub-groups and as Lloyd himself demonstrates, certain elements in the social structure of the Yoruba are common to virtually all the sub-groups.

Similarly there are regional variations in religious worship. But though many deities, some of them known in very limited areas exist, the Yoruba belief in a supreme being, *Olodumare* and have a host of 'national deities' whose positions correspond in virtually all schemes in which the deities are arranged in a hierarchy.

There are three types of political organization in Yorubaland. Some sub-groups for example the Ana and Isa in the north-west as well as the Yagba and Oworo in the north-eastern extremity were not organized into centralized political States. The pre-colonial level of political organization was not beyond that of the village, each settlement regarding itself as autonomous. Social cohesion within each sub-group was kept by the use of some religious institutions and the chief priests of local deities exercised supreme political authority³¹.

The inability of these sub-groups to form centralized States was not unrelated to their location in hilly regions not conducive to human movements and so a hinderance to large-scale political organizations. Furthermore, the extremities bordered on the territories of very powerful States: the Asante, Fon and Songhai in the western extremity; the Edo and Nupe in the eastern extremity. These continually till the 19th century, revaged

29 P.C. Lloyd, *Yoruba Land Law*, London, Oxford, 1962 p. 30 also his "Agnatic and Cognatic Descent Among the Yoruba" *MAN* (n.s.) xiv, 1966 Pp. 484-500

30 D. Bender "Agnatic or Cognatic: A re-evaluation of Ondo Descent" *MAN* (n.s.) 5, 1970 p. 71-87.

31 O.J. Igue, "Quelques Aspects du Peuplement et des populations Yoruba du Republic Populaire du Bénin in I.A. Akinjogbin & G.O. Ekemode (eds.) *Yoruba Civilisation* vol. I, Ife p. 83; A. Obayemi, "The Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples and their Neighbours Before 1600" in J.F. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds) *History of West Africa* vol. I, Longman 1976 p. 207.

the regions and generated series of population upheavals which prevented nucleated settlements.

In the second type of political organization, some measure of political centralization existed. Samuel Johnson labelled this type 'kinglings'³²; Nathaniel Fadipe used the term 'chiefdom' and gave an apt description: 'It was not a sovereign State but a dependency or constituent unit of a State'³³. Although the internal affairs of a chiefdom were the immediate concern of the headchief and his councillors, the activities had to be sanctioned by an external party, usually the head of a sovereign State. Prominent among sub-groups that fall into this category are the Anago and Egbado States which have often been mistakenly referred to as 'kingdoms'³⁴ mainly on the basis of post-19th century local traditions.

In the Yoruba conception, the highest degree of political centralization was that of a kingdom, a sovereign State headed by an *oba* (king) whose right to political authority was symbolized by this exclusive use of crowns with beaded fringes.

It is obvious from the above that the structure of political organization of the sub-groups differs from one region to the other. This is clearly seen among those sub-groups whose level of political organization reached that of kingdom.

It has already been pointed out³⁵ that symbols and insignia of office are used by peoples whose offices are constitutionally different, that common sets of titles are applied to different people in the status hierarchy by the various sub-group and that the functional importance of some traditional governmental institutions varies from one sub-group to the other. Among a few sub-groups such as the Ondo, Ijesa and Idaisa, women played prominent roles in government while in others they operated only in the background.

On the basis of these differences, Fadipe³⁶ classified Yoruba kingdoms into four: Ife, Oyo, Ijebu and Ekiti, but he believed that they had the same basic political pattern and that, whatever form it exhibited, each sub-group was organized in hierarchical form with the town as the basic political unit. More important was the concept of *Oduduwa* as the source of ultimate political authority. Like the golden stool of the Ashanti, the *Oduduwa* factor was a unifying one which underlay the political belief of all Yoruba. Rulers of all centralized States claim kinship affiliation through *Oduduwa* who is believed to be the initiator of the monarchical system in Yorubaland.

32 S. Johnson, *The History op. cit.* Pp. 75-77.

33 N. Fadipe, *Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan, 1970, p. 199

34 P. Morton-Williams, "The Oyo-Yoruba" *op. cit.* Pp. 25-45; A.I. Asiwaju, *Western Yorubaland under European Rule*, Longman, 1976 Pp. 15-19.

35 D. Forde, *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples op. cit.* p. 20 1973.

36 N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology op. cit.* p. 199

Political centres tend to become cultural centres incorporating into a peoples's culture, the totality of their experience. As long as there were many political centres (i.e. kingdoms) in pre-19th century Yorubaland, there would be many sub-cultural units. Thus to talk of many independent units and refer to all of them as forming an ethnic group is not contradictory.

Linguists would, however, argue that the most obvious sphere to perceive the degree of cultural variation among the Yoruba is the language. Abiodun Adetugbo³⁷ divides Yorubaland into three linguistic groups, each of which corresponds with an ethnographic and political division.

As he points out 'even though dialects of the same language are by and large mutually intelligible, we still recognize that a person speaking a dialect different from our own speaks with an accent'. Others have expressed the view that the general belief that dialects of the same language are usually mutually intelligible does not apply to the dialectal variations in Yorubaland. Yoruba dialectologists have for long insisted that the mutual intelligibility often ascribed to the Yoruba language should be critically reviewed. Nathaniel Fadipe would seem to have blazed the trail when he talked of the "extreme dialectal differentiation" which makes the language of one sub-group almost a foreign language to another³⁸. The fact is that, while some degree of mutual intelligibility existed in the dialects of contiguous groups, groups separated from each other, were less likely to understand each other. For instance while a Sabe man in the Republic of Benin would find it easy to understand an Idaisa man who lived a few kilometres from Sabeland, he was likely to find it difficult to understand the dialects of the Ikale or Ondo in the south-eastern country of Yorubaland. Indeed during the 19th century, the young Samuel Ajayi Crowther while passing from his native village of Osogun (near old Oyo) through the Egba and Ijebu countries to Lagos found the local dialects very strange to him.

But though the degree of mutual intelligibility of the dialects tend to decrease the farther apart the sub-groups are, all the dialects are basically members of the same language and can be recognized as such. As Geoffrey Parrinder once pointed out, any Yorubaman could make himself understood in the western extremity, "which he could not do in the vicinity of Abomey"³⁹ among the neighbouring Fon peoples.

This explains why at the middle of the 19th century when christian missionaries adopted the Oyo dialect as the 'standard Yoruba', the various sub-groups found it easy to learn while the non-Yoruba sub-groups such

37 A. Adetugbo "The Yoruba Language in Yoruba History" in Biobaku, S.O. (ed) *Sources of Yoruba History*. Oxford Clarendon 1973 Pp. 184-185.

38 N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology op. cit.* p. 37.

39 E.G. Parrinder "The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples in Dahomey" - *Africa xvii: 2*, 1943 Pp. 289-312.

as the Egun of Badagry had difficulties with some of the alphabets⁴⁰. Furthermore, the predominance of the Oyo dialect over a fairly wide region lessened the dialectal differences and provided a common medium of expression used in commercial and other affairs involving different sub-groups. In spite of the dialectal variations, each sub-group regarded itself as part of a larger group which speaks a common language, the *Anago* which was more widely comprehensible than any of the dialects and from which each dialect presumably emerged. It is quite significant that, as the various names shown above indicate, language was the major criterion external observers used for identifying the Yoruba from their neighbours.

Among the various Yoruba sub-groups themselves there was a consciousness of belonging to the same group distinct from non-Yoruba groups such as the Edo, Nupe, Bariba and Fon with which they share common boundaries. How and when exactly this consciousness began is not yet fully worked out, but the outlines are clearly emerging.

It is now known that there were two broad periods of Yoruba history. During the first period, which probably lasted well into the first millennium A.D. the whole of what later became Yorubaland was made up of scattered communities. From available oral traditions and ethnographic data, there appears to have been a fairly high degree of mutual intelligibility in language and similar socio-political organizations all over the area.

But we require more adequate information to determine the degree to which the scattered communities were aware of belonging to the same socio-political entity.

What is certain at the present state of our knowledge is that by the second period when the foundation of the kingdoms were laid, the various communities were already aware of belonging to a higher socio-political entity than their immediate environment.

But the feeling of sameness did not surface for the whole period before the 19th century except in the periphery of the Yoruba country where some sub-groups share contiguous territories with non-Yoruba peoples. In times of peace and tranquility there was no need to give the consciousness a practical demonstration; the feeling of sameness therefore remained in the background. The process of sub-ethnic differentiation itself appears to have begun with the process of State-formation which apparently dated to about 8th century A.D.

The consensus of opinion on the issue is that the Yoruba world began at Ile-Ife, the sacred city where Oduduwa created land, out of primordial water⁴¹ and founded the first kingdom. Later children of Oduduwa

40 W.G. Wormal, 'A Report on the Egun Speaking People of Badagri District' 1934 File no. RG/W3, (Nigeria National Archives, Ibadan).

41 S.O. Biobaku, *Origin of the Yoruba*, Lugard Lecture, Lagos, 1957, p. 11.

constituted themselves into dynastic groups and moved out to found new kingdoms, imposing themselves, in each case, on a collection of pre-Oduduwa communities. The career of these dynastic groups as recorded in local traditions⁴² suggests that a cultural revolution accompanied the foundation of the kingdoms.

The development of centralized States led to the coalescing of pre-existing linguistic and ethnographic traits in each locality. The concomitant result in each case was the emergence of a culturally homogeneous unit spiritually bound to the dynastic group. Invariably, a sub-ethnic unit emerged coinciding with the territorial sphere of influence of the dynastic group.

This emergence of sub-ethnic traits was intensified by geographical variations and the peculiar historical experiences of each sub-group. Thus the Oyo in the fairly open savannah region succeeded in establishing a large political State in contrast to the over sixteen independent States that existed in the rugged area of the Ekiti. In the eastern part where the influence of the neighbouring Benin kingdom appears paramount, there are to be found the oval-shaped ceremonial swords characteristic of the Edo⁴³ while the Idaisa in the west operated the Fon political system in which all male chiefs have corresponding female title holders⁴⁴.

In spite of this, all the rulers of kingdoms who shared from the ideas of State formation started by Oduduwa at Ile-Ife were bound together. They saw each other as belonging to the same family within which inter-kingdom relations had to be conducted. Thus all the rulers of major pre-19th century Yoruba kingdoms were placed on a single genealogy; their common descent from Oduduwa demanded friendship and cooperation. Although not all major Yoruba kingdoms were established directly from Ile-Ife, rulers of kingdoms founded from any of those established from Ile-Ife eventually got incorporated into Ife rituals.

The overwhelming influence of the Oduduwa dynastic groups, even among those sub-groups that were not organized into kingdoms, led to the widespread tradition that Ile-Ife was the centre where Yoruba culture first crystalized and from where the salient aspects of Yoruba civilization spread to all parts of the region now called Yorubaland.

Reference to Ile-Ife was therefore the Yoruba's way of expressing their consciousness of forming an ethnic group. It bound all the sub-groups together psychologically. As Bolaji Idowu emphasized, it was regarded as

42 R.S. Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* Methuen, 1969

43 S.A. Akintoye, "The North-eastern Yoruba Districts and the Benin Kingdom" *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* vol. 4 1969 Pp. 539-553.

44 For the Fon System see W.J. Argyle, *The Fon of Dahomey* Oxford, 1966 Pp. 63-65.

the ultimate home to which all individuals returned at death⁴⁵. This belief was not confined to a small part of Yorubaland nor was it just a 19th century development. There were references by early 16th century traders on the coast of Benin to an interior city which most probably was the Ile-Ife of the traditions⁴⁶. The Lander brothers were told in Oyo in 1830 that Ile-Ife was the place where all blackmen were created⁴⁷. In the middle of the 19th century, the Reverend Ajayi Crowther recorded a tradition which links some of the western Yoruba sub-groups with Ile-Ife⁴⁸. The German explorer, Leo Frobenius, first heard of "Ilife" in Timbuktu and Wagadugu in present day Republics of Mali and Upper Volta respectively. He was for long unable to locate the place or identify the name "Ilife" with any existing town. "It was only when in Atakpame in southern Togoland", Frobenius wrote "that I identified it with Ife"⁴⁹. It is presumable that Frobenius heard many stories with frequent references and even description of Ile-Ife at Atakpame which is today the westernmost major Yoruba settlement.

It is conceivable that each sub-group was aware of the characteristics that distinguished it from the others; but there is no evidence that before the 19th century such awareness attained the dimension of a xenophobia or had serious adverse effects on relations between one sub-group and the others. But during the 19th century Yoruba civil wars, the consciousness of belonging to different sub-groups was given a practical demonstration. It was during this time for instance that the Yoruba began to enslave each other⁵⁰. With the imposition of European colonial rule, this consciousness was further intensified as a result of conflicting claims by various sub-groups for political and social privileges in the colonial order. Then, everybody suddenly became aware of the differences that existed between one sub-group and the others, a phenomenon which found a parallel development in Yoruba historiography⁵¹.

Nevertheless, away from home, the cultural homogeneity of the sub-groups transcended little local variations and parochial feelings subside. This is what made Christopher Fyfe⁵² to describe the Yoruba recaptives

45 E.B. Idowu, *Olodumare op. cit.*, p. 13-14.

46 See excerpts in T. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspective*, Oxford 1975 Pp. 122-304 See also A. Ryder "A reconsideration of Ife - Benin Relationship". *Journal of African History* vi i, 1965

47 R. Hallet (ed). *The Niger Journal of Richard and John Lander*, Routledge, London, 1955 Pp. 88-89

48 See. E.G. Parrinder, *The Story of Ketu*, Ibadan University Press 1967 p. 16.

49 L. Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa* vol. I, New York 1968 Edition p. 68

50 E.A. Oroge, "The Institution of Slavery in Yorubaland, with Particular Reference to the 19th century" Ph.D. Thesis Birmingham, 1971 Pp. 115-122.

51 R. Law, "Early Yoruba Historiography" *History in Africa* 3, 1976 Pp. 68-76.

52 C.A. Fyfe *A History of Sierra-Leone op. cit.*, p. 172

in Sierra-Leone as "the largest, most cohesive group". Had the ethnic differences been as great as later writers assume, it would have been carried over to Sierra-Leone. Reverend Koelle, who started the whole debate as to whether one cannot speak of the Yoruba as an ethnic group, himself noted that despite the cultural affinity between the Mahis and the Dahomeans (Fon), the two were mortal enemies in Sierra-Leone because of the conflicts between them in their homeland. Quoting Dosu, his Mahi informant, Koelle observed that "they can never eat bread together"⁵³. If with the Yoruba civil wars and the consequent upheavals fresh in their memory, the Yoruba recaptives could still draw together as a group distinct from the others, then there must be a firm base for such a pan-Yoruba union back in their homeland.

Ethnic cohesiveness does not necessarily mean that the various sub-groups formed a single political entity. Misconceptions along this line seem to be the main reason for the denial of a pre-19th century ethnic unity among the Yoruba. Since culture is dynamic, variations are certain to occur in the social and political organizations of a people and one could not expect a rigid conformity to what may be regarded as the 'Yoruba type' of organization. In spite of all dialectal, social and political variations, the Yoruba is a single cultural group from the point of view of a common language and sense of common history.

53 S.W. Koelle, *Poyglotta Africana* op. cit. p. 5.