

RETHINKING YORUBA CULTURE IN THE LIGHT OF YORUBA ORIGINS

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ABSTRACT

There are existing traditions which teach that the Yorubas and their culture originate independently or from Egypt or from Israel or from Mecca or even from Etruscan sources. Many scholars and contemporary Yorubas have accepted the Egyptian thesis for Yoruba origins as true because there are many aspects of the culture of the ancient Egyptians that are similar to Yoruba culture. The question arises: what are the cultural aspects that are similar or different between the Yorubas and the Egyptians, or the Israelites, or the Arabians, or the Etruscans? How can the study of these foreign cultures influence the study for the search for Yoruba origins? This research is a study of how certain foreign and ancient cultures are different or similar to Yoruba culture. The main purpose of this research is to explain how the search for the origins of Yoruba culture can contribute to challenging contemporary researchers to begin to look into West Africa and not Egypt or the ancient Near East in the search for Yoruba origin.

INTRODUCTION

The word “culture” originates from the Latin word *cultura* which means tending or cultivating. The contemporary conceptualisation of culture as a form of “training, development and refinement of mind, taste and manners” (Hoppers 2004:1–2) suggests that the word has gone through some evolutionary stages. Culture is today understood as behavioural patterns, arts, beliefs and thoughts transmitted chronologically within a given space. It is a “precipitate of history” and a way of life carried along by a group of people. Unlike some genetic patterns inherited or transmitted from parents to progenies, culture is rather learned; hence culture can be defined as a body of learned behaviours within a societal group and within a particular

period of time (cf. Hoppers 2004:1–2).¹ It is not known precisely how human culture emerged. Anthropologists think that two major processes influenced the development of human culture. The first process is the Pleistocene fluctuations which led to the deterioration of the climate about 2 million years ago; and as a result, early humans were forced to develop anatomical and cognitive mechanisms that enabled them to adapt to their environments hence developing different cultural patterns (Richerson & Boyd 2014:1–5). The second factor for the origins of human culture is social learning. Social learning is a mechanism of phenotypic adaptation in which an individual at the expense of time and energy acquires information about local environmental conditions. The individual through risk-taking, trials and errors develops the neurological machinery necessary to learn. Most anthropologists including Richerson & Boyd favour the former (Pleistocene fluctuations) as the main basis for the origin of human culture. However, fossils of early humans and especially the Neanderthals accredited as the originators of human culture have not been found in West Africa (Shaw 2004:25; Szalay 2013:3). Since it is likely that the study of early humans in West Africa is currently understudied, this researcher shall concentrate on the study of modern human cultures and specifically those of the Yorubas. At the moment, the origin of the cultures of the African people are still not known because Africans in antiquity have no written record on the origin of their cultures and even if they did, such a document is yet to be discovered (Delafosse 1931:xxv–2).²

In modern Sub-Saharan Africa, the Yorubas of Nigeria have been described as one of the largest ethnic groups. Many Yorubas are also indigenes of Benin Republic and Togo (Leroy, Olaleye-Oruene, Koeppen-Schomerus & Bryan 2010:1; Ayandele 2004:121). Ade further explains that the Yorubas and their religions or culture have had a great influence around the world. He describes the Yorubas as a people who find

¹ In this research, burial practices and afterlife beliefs are regarded as aspects of human culture.

² Notwithstanding, Africans have had other means of knowledge-dissemination such as oral tradition, oral history, poetry, songs, poems, legends, proverbs, myths, folk tales, crafts, rituals and ceremonies, folk songs and many more (Oyebade 2004:52). These traditions were rather learned, they were not formally recorded especially by West Africans before the eighteenth century.

it very difficult to forfeit their beliefs irrespective of where they find themselves (Ade 2006:3). They have been described as “the most outstanding people of ‘Black Africa’ with respect to their myths” (Lange 2004:39). The Yorubas are among the richest in Africa with regard to the preservation of the oral history of their past (Lange 2004:39). Despite their geographical location, the Yorubas value their culture with the highest respect. In simple terms, the Yorubas can easily be described or identified as “a people of culture”. The question arises: Where did Yoruba culture emerge?

While some historians question the use of culture and oral tradition to write history (Wesler 2002:2, 3, 8, 19–24), many more historians, archaeologists and anthropologists on the other hand believe that culture and oral tradition have a significant role to play in developing a history. In other words, they think that culture is a “historical tool” or “historical evidence”. M.E. Kropp Dakubu wrote on the significance of linguistics in the writing of West African history. He notes that an important aspect of the history of language is the external context or the circumstances in which words were used. With regard to the relevance of language as a culture and in the writing of history, the question of where, when and by what kind of community a language was used can provide the historian with relevant information (Dakubu 2006:52–55). Furthermore, most historical information about the ancient Egyptians is obtained from inscriptions and other artefacts mostly found in tombs (cf. Scheffler 2000:117); this indicates that burial culture was very important to the Egyptians and in the writing of their history; and mostly importantly, it indicates that culture should not be neglected in the writing of history. This researcher, using mostly the works of Johnson and Lucas³ (who are regarded as great writers of Yoruba history), discusses the various theories regarding the origins of Yoruba culture. The aim of this research is not to be categorical about where Yoruba culture emerged but to add to previous knowledge on the influences of especially burials and the afterlife on the theories of

³ Olumide Lucas, a former pastor of St. Paul’s Church, Breadfruit in Lagos, Nigeria, was the first indigenous Yoruba writer to approach the writing of Yoruba history from the perspective of comparative religion. Lucas, an acclaimed Egyptologist, did an intensive work in comparing Egyptian culture to that of the Yorubas (cf. Olupona 1993:243). The views of Lucas with regard to developing the theories of the origin of Yoruba culture form a major part of this research.

the origin of Yoruba culture in the search for Yoruba origins, and to encourage the study of West Africa as a possible region for the origins of Yoruba civilization, culture and people. This researcher also intends to promote the ideology that “culture” could as well serve as a direct or indirect historical tool or historical evidence in historical analysis.

THE ORIGIN OF THE YORUBAS

The origin of the Yorubas and of their culture remains one of the most contested in Africa. Johnson (1921:3) describes the origin of the Yorubas as one which “is involved in obscurity” and Akintoye (2004:3) admits that not much is at present known about the origin of the Yoruba people. In the twenty-first century, there are two major explanations that are relied upon to explain the origin of the Yorubas: first, the Oduduwa creation myth which teaches that Olodumare (God) sent Oduduwa from heaven to create the earth and all that is within including humans, and secondly, the migration theory which teaches that the Yoruba ancestor Oduduwa originates from some regions of the Near East or the Middle East. Contemporary Yoruba historians believe that the migration theory gives a better but imperfect explanation for Yoruba origins (cf. Oyebade 2004:54).⁴ The most comprehensive and most honoured chronicle on Yoruba history is the one documented by Reverend Samuel Johnson. Johnson argues:

- That Yoruba culture and those of the ancient Egyptians are similar hence the Yorubas originate in Egypt (cf. Johnson 1921:6–7).⁵
- That Oduduwa legend teaches that the ancestors of the Yorubas emerged from Egypt and not Mecca or Arabia as it has been speculated (Johnson 1921:5). He says that the ancestors of the Yorubas were rather Coptic Christians from Egypt

⁴ It should be of note that a study of the origins of Yoruba culture basically encompasses a study of the history of their migration into West Africa.

⁵ This researcher is aware that there are some scholars who have argued that ancient Egypt was not a part of the African continent but a part of an Indo-European territory. This research is done with the consciousness that Egypt was and is an African country (Adamo 2013:73).

and not Arabians or Muslims from Mecca. Johnson believes that Mohammed Belo⁶ influenced the Yorubas to begin to think that their ancestors were Muslims (Johnson 1921:5–6).

In addition, the precise reason why Johnson associated Yoruba origin with ancient Egypt is still not known, but it can be suggested that his Christian background and the popular perceived ideology of the civilisation in ancient Egypt would have guided his thoughts.⁷ A number of writers of Yoruba history especially from the middle of the twentieth century up to today rely on the writings of Johnson as one of the earliest and the most detailed literatures with regard to the understanding of Yoruba origins (cf. Akintoye 2004:3). He is seemingly deified as a Yoruba hero and his writings uncontested and incomparable to any on Yoruba history. With regard to Johnson's writing, Falola (1999:32) says that despite the possible technical and chronological discrepancies in Johnson's work, many Yoruba people believe that all critics of Johnson's writing are wrong and Johnson is right: "It is an article of faith to many of its readers that Johnson is always right." It is therefore not a surprise that many contemporary Yorubas seemingly regard Johnson's Egyptian thesis of Yoruba origins as accurate. Both the Yoruba creation myth and the migration theory affirm Oduduwa as the original ancestor of the Yoruba people (Oyebade 2004:57). The true identity if Oduduwa is still contested. Johnson says "Oduduwa is really a mythical personage".⁸ More so, there is no archaeological evidence of migration from Egypt to Yorubaland;

⁶ Captain Clapperton in *Narratives of travels and discoveries in northern and central Africa in the years 1822, 1823 and 1824* is said to have quoted Belo who adduced that Yoruba ancestors were originally the descendants of Nimrod who settled in Arabia before migrating to West Africa. Johnson describes Belo as the first writer of Nigerian history who associated the Yorubas with Arabia (Johnson 1921:5–6). Mohammed Belo is the son of Uthman dan Fodio who was the founder of Islamic jihad in Nigeria. Belo was a brilliant thinker and writer. He established Islamic courts in Sokoto and unlike his father he did not use weapons but diplomacy in resolving conflicts (Omolewa 2008:121–122). With regard to his writings, Belo also relied on information he received from Islamic traders and preachers who came from Arabia, from North Africa and from Mali (cf. Omolewa 2008:90–93).

⁷ Johnson did not have a formal qualification in Egyptian studies; rather, he had specific interests in both Roman and Egyptian civilisations, like one of his mentors, Buhler. Johnson read the works of Caesar and Eutropius after which he made an attempt to link the civilisations of Egypt and Greece to those of the Yorubas (Falola 1999:40).

⁸ "Such is the desire of nations to find a mythical origin for themselves through their kings and ancestors" (Johnson 1921:143).

there are also no specific people in Nigeria that can be categorically regarded as remnants of the Egyptian people (Agai 2014:3–6). While scholars still debate the unknown origins of the Yoruba people, this researcher contends that a study of the origin of their culture could add knowledge on the debate for their origins.

THE ORIGIN OF YORUBA CULTURE

The theory of independent origin

The theory of independent origin teaches that Yoruba culture emerged independently of any foreign influences. The theory proposes that the Yoruba culture emerged when the first group of Yoruba people settled at their first settlements in Yorubaland (Lucas 1970:373). Lucas (1970:373) thinks that it is illogical to say that Yoruba culture emerged independently. He says that even the Yorubas themselves know that their culture originated from some African sources and not in isolation. He noted that the few differences found between some West African cultures and that of the Yorubas are due to the fact that no culture is static. Lange (2004:321) also shares this sentiment when he notes that Yoruba culture might have been borrowed from the “Sudanic states”. Frobenius (1913:323) thinks that the Yoruba civilisation is so unique that it makes little or no sense to say that their culture developed independently and that is why he thinks that the Yoruba culture is of Etruscan origin. Neanderthals are allegedly the originators of burial practices, yet their fossils and those of other early humans have not been found in either Egypt or Yorubaland (Jordan 1976:28; cf. Agai 2013b:52–53). It thus suggests that early humans might not have lived in Yorubaland and if they did, information about their occupation on Nigerian soil is scanty or unavailable. It can therefore be said that only modern humans first occupied Yorubaland. If this is the assumption, it therefore makes sense to say that Yoruba culture might have been developed or influenced through some unknown foreign sources and not through the theory of independent origin.

The theory of Hebraic or Jewish origin

The theory of Hebraic or Jewish origin proposes that the Yoruba culture is a product of Jewish culture. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African bishop, is one of the earliest writers to propose that the similarities between Yoruba and Israelite cultures are indications that Yoruba culture originated in Israel (Oyebade 2004:51). The Yorubas and the Jews share these cultural aspects among others:⁹

circumcision, the division of tribes into separate families, and very frequently into the number twelve; the rigid interdiction of marriage between families too nearly related; bloody sacrifices, with the sprinkling of blood upon the altars and door-posts; a specified time for mourning for the dead, during which they shave their heads, and wear soiled or tattered clothes; demoniacal possessions, purifications and other usages probably of a Jewish origin. (Lucas 1970:379)

Lucas believes that there are so many “leading features” which connect Jewish and Yoruba cultures, especially that pertaining to the offering of animal sacrifice (Lucas 1970:381–382). Lucas cited Father J.J. Williams as the main protagonist of the theory of Jewish or Hebraic influences on Yoruba culture (Lucas 1970:382). Contemporary researchers on Semitic migrations to Africa like Professor Magdel le Roux of the University of South Africa believes that there are remnants of Jews still living in Africa. Le Roux taught that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman government in 70 C.E. led to the forced migration of Jewish people to both southern and western Africa. She adds that an important and popular Yemenite folklore teaches that the ancestors of the Lemba clan migrated from Palestine to Yemen forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple. The Lemba clan believes that their ancestors were Jews from Yemen who were cut off from the rest of the Jewish people at the emergence of Islam in Yemen. Other Jewish remnants found in Africa are the Falashas of Ethiopia and the descendants of Beni Israel who are today part of the Wolof and Mandinge communities in Senegal; they were forced to convert to Islam in the

⁹ Although Lucas compared this culture to those of the Guineans, yet he implied that the Yorubas practice the same Jewish culture as the Guineans.

eighteenth century C.E. (le Roux 2008:3, 5).

Mr. George E. Lichtblau was an attaché and a political officer at the American Embassy in Tel Aviv. While he was serving as a service officer in the US Department of State in francophone West Africa, around the 1970s, he made an astonishing discovery about many black Africans who claim Jewish origin.¹⁰ He pointed out that in the course of the Jewish Diaspora, some of the Jewish people formed Jewish communities in Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Senegal, Western Sudan and some southern parts of Africa¹¹ (cf. le Roux 2008:16).¹² Lichtblau believes that there were Judaic communities formed in Gao, Timbuktu,

¹⁰ Lichtblau's work on some Africans' claim to Jewish identity was based on interviews he conducted with people (in West Africa) about their beliefs, their folklores, myths and stories. Most importantly, Lichtblau observed their behaviour and saw connections between the Jewish people and these Africans. At the moment, there is no conclusive scientific investigation and evidence for his claims but many other scholars like le Roux and Williams agree that there are remnants of Jewish descendants in many African countries.

¹¹ Originally from Kurinsky (2010).

¹² Jewish Diasporas had taken place at various periods. For example, the invasion of Israel by the Assyrians and the Babylonians might have led to the migration of the Jewish people to the mentioned regions of the world. In 598 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem and this led to the assassination of Jehoiakim, a Judean leader (Jagersma 1978:175, Jr 22:18; 36:30). During the reign of Jehoiachin, Nebuchadnezzar and his war-lords took away the treasures in the Temple and they cut apart all the gold bowls which king Solomon kept. They also took 10 000 men into captivity and Jehoiachin's wives, officials and queen mother were also taken away (2 Kg 24:8–18); "There is evidence that he [Jehoiachin] continued to be regarded as king of Judah while in prison, and his successor acted as a kind of regent in Jerusalem" (Hindson 2001:138). In 589 B.C.E. Pharaoh Apries collaborated with Zedekiah to fight against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar through his army chief Nebuzaradan invaded Judah. Zedekiah was captured, his eyes taken out and his two sons killed. Seraiah, the chief priest and Zephaniah, the chief priest's assistant, the three Temple guardsman, a commander of the army of Judah, the chief recruiting officer, five of the king's counsellors and six farmers were all taken to Riblah and killed (1 Kg 25:8–21; Jr 52:12–14; Ez 33:21). Nebuzaradan burned the Temple, the King's palace and all other important houses in Judah. He also broke the bronze pillars and the bronze tank of the Temple and took to Babylon the bases, pots, shovels, fire pans, snuffers, spoon, gold, and silver bowls. The Temple was burned on the ninth month of Ab and the day became a memorial to the Israelites as a day of mourning, fasting and prayer, observed by generations of their descendants (2 Chr 7:3–7). Gedeliah, the next king of Judah was also assassinated by Ishmael (2 Kg 25:22). The few poor Judeans left in Judah feared another Babylonian invasion, so they began to leave Judah to seek refuge in Egypt. The Edomite also saw the weakness of Judah so they invaded the southern area of Judah (Ez 25:12–14; Lm 4:21). Such kinds of invasions might have contributed to the migration of the Jewish people to other parts of the world.

Ghana, Banako, Agades and Ibadan.¹³ Mr. Lichtblau in the 1970s also discovered that the “glassmakers” in Niger also traced their ancestral roots back to Hebron and these same glassmakers have a craftsmanship connection to the glassmakers in Bida (northern Nigeria) (Kurinsky 2010).

However, and with regard to linguistic similarities, Parrinder (1951:199) says that there is rather little or no linguistic connection between the Yorubas and the Jews. Lucas also believes that the very little cultural similarities that exist between the Yorubas and the Jews are not enough reason to conclude that Yoruba culture is of Jewish origin. Lucas thinks that the Yoruba culture is more connected to that of the Egyptians than that of the Israelites (Lucas 1970:382–388; cf. Parrinder 1951:199). Oyebade (2004:51) also says that there is no historical analysis of any kind of serious connection between the Israelites and the Yorubas. Agai (2013a:19–20) compared the views of the afterlife of Israelites with those of the Yorubas, and pointed out the differences that exist between the two cultures.¹⁴ The absence of clear geographical evidence for any form of contact between the Israelites and the Yorubas, and the non-availability of any specific peoples that practice strict Israelite culture in Yorubaland renders the Israelite-origin thesis ineffective.

The theory of Atlantic origin

The theory of Atlantic origin proposes that the Yoruba culture originated from Etruscan culture. The theory further teaches that Etruscan culture passed through the Straits of Gibraltar (which connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea) or the Pillars of Hercules and concentrated itself in North Africa somewhere around the

¹³ Ibadan in Nigeria is a region occupied by the Yorubas (cf. Omolewa 2008:55).

¹⁴ Ancient Israelites were not too concerned about the events of the afterlife. They considered Sheol to be the home of the dead and they thought of it differently depending on their specific socio-political circumstances. For example, initially there was no idea of punishment of the wicked or reward for the righteous in Sheol; rather, Sheol was thought of as a home for all the dead (Gn 37:35; 42:38; 44:29). There was another notion of Sheol as an uncomfortable destiny of the dead (Dt 32:22; 2 Sm 22: 6; Ps 16:10; 18:5; 116:3). Sheol was also perceived as strictly the home of the wicked in the afterlife (Job 24:19; Ps 55:15; Pr 7:27; 15:11; Is 14:15; Ez 18:20) (cf. Agai 2011:195). Unlike the Israelites who had varied and uncertain views about the afterlife, the Yorubas are certain about the destinies of their dead (Agai 2013b:1–9).

region of the Atlas Mountains. It is from the Atlas Mountains that the culture is said to have travelled eastward and along the west coast of Africa in a southerly direction until it reached Yorubaland (Frobenius 1913:345). Frobenius gave several reasons for the connection of the Yoruba culture to that of the Etruscans and he thinks that Etruscan culture passed through the Atlantic Ocean to Yorubaland, hence the name “Atlantic” (Frobenius 1913:321). He says that these cultural practices are common between the Yorubas and Etruscans (Frobenius 1913:322–345):

- (1) the colour and form of bows and arrows used by the Yorubas which are similar to those in Morocco;
- (2) the drum shape and other articles peculiar to North Africa are not found in the Sudan, but are found in Yorubaland;
- (3) water storage construction systems. Frobenius thought that the style of houses constructed by the Yorubas was similar to the ones used by the Etruscans, Moroccans and Algerians whereby *impluvium* are built in the centre of the house while apartments with verandas are built in a rectangular form.
- (4) The North African hand loom, unknown in the Sudan, is found among Yoruba women;
- (5) the construction of their houses. Yorubas construct houses with ridge roofs that are similar to those in North Africa.
- (6) The existence of *Templum* among both the Yorubas and North Africans whereby houses are built around a temple or sacred building and even in towns, houses were built around sacred buildings. Frobenius thinks that even the religion of Ile Ife is based on the “Templum” idea (Frobenius 1913:336; cf. Agai 2013a:2).
- (7) Frobenius identifies Olokun (Yoruba deity) as the equal of Poseidon Sea-God (Etruscan deity) or the ram-headed deity simply because of Olokun’s connection to the sea. However, Lucas believes that comparing Olokun and the Etruscan Poseidon Sea-God is inappropriate because the Etruscans regarded the Poseidon Sea-God alone as their major or sovereign deity but the Yorubas regard Olokun as one of their gods which exist fundamentally because of its relationship with other Yoruba deities (Frobenius 1913:347–349). Lucas (1948:212–219) says that

although Olokun means the “owner of the sea”, yet, to him, this idea is related to the ancient Egyptian deity known as Adimu or Adumu meaning “Lord of the primordial abyss”. Lucas stressed that the cult of the ram-headed deity could have come by way of Egypt, because ram-headed deities were also worshipped in Egypt. Lucas suggest that both the Egyptian and the Etruscan culture in North Africa believed in the existence of a sea-god but that the Yoruba connection of Olokun to the sea correlates more with the Egyptian culture than that of Etruscan culture (Lucas 1948:352, 393).

- (8) Frobenius (1913:212–219) says that the Ifa cult originated in North Africa and is practiced by the Yorubas as well. The Yorubas do practice the Ifa cult by celebrating and making sacrifices to a supreme spirit called Ifa who is believed to bless people through mediums like the priests and diviners. Contrary to the exclusion of the Ifa cult from Egypt by Frobenius, Lucas notes that the Ifa cult is Egyptian in form and in name (Lucas 1948:352, 393) and that the rituals behind the ram-headed cult in Egypt are almost the same as those of the Ifa cult. Lucas further noted that the Ifa cult was practiced among the Yorubas before they were influenced by Islam or by the Arabian culture. Lucas reiterated that the Ifa cult is not only practiced by the Yorubas alone but also by other West African tribes such as the Ibos and the Ekoi. The influences of Arabian culture on the practice of the Ifa cult among the Yorubas made Parrinder (1942:137–149) assume that the cult itself originated in Arabia and not in Egypt or North East Africa.

Furthermore, Frobenius’ findings¹⁵ in comparing certain articles and house forms between North Africa and the Yorubas are true (Lucas 1948:348). His observation of some cultural connections between the Yorubas and some Etruscan cultures is also true, yet his conclusion raises certain questions. For example, these same Etruscan elements like the hood loom, arrow, *Impluvium*, *Templum* and others listed by Frobenius are also widely used in Egypt but Frobenius did not explain how these

¹⁵ Etruscan elements found among the Yorubas include the *impluvium*, the bow, the hand loom, the *Templum* and all the others listed by Frobenius. Lucas (1948:350) however thinks that these Etruscan influences on the Yorubas only occupied a very small portion of the Yoruba culture.

elements found their way into Egypt. Lucas (1948:351) believes that the Etruscan culture did not originate in Egypt but passed through Egypt and from there to Yorubaland. Lucas (1948:351) noted that Etruscan communities actually lived in ancient Egypt where their Etruscan elements travelled to Yorubaland by way of the interior, that is, through the Sudan. This contradicts Frobenius' notion that Etruscan culture did not pass through the interior (Frobenius 1913:336).

Frobenius' exclusion of the Sudan as a possible route for the transfer of Etruscan culture to Yorubaland is possible because Etruscan elements have not been found in the Sudan. Moreover, Lucas (1948:351) suggests that the absence of similar cultures in the Sudan can be explained by the supposition that immigrants from Egypt would find it hard to settle in the arid desert climate of the Sudan and that the influence of the Etruscans from Egypt could only be felt permanently in Yorubaland and other parts of West Africa where geographical conditions support a prolonged visit or temporary settlement (Lucas 1948:351). However, both Frobenius and Lucas did not use any archaeological evidence to prove the inclusion or the exclusion of the Sudan as a possible route to Yorubaland from North Africa or from Egypt. Frobenius' view that all monuments of ancient culture are placed on the coast (Frobenius 1913:336) can also be questioned because important Yoruba places like Ile Ife and Offa where these monuments (Etruscan articles) were found are about two hundred miles away from the coast (Lucas 1948:349). Yoruba afterlife culture has more reputable correlations with other afterlife cultures within Africa than with those of Etruscan sources.

The theory of Egyptian origin

The theory of the Egyptian origin promotes the idea that the Yoruba culture originated in Egypt (Lucas 1970:391). Frobenius (1913:326–336) objects strongly to this Egyptian theory. Parrinder on the other hand believes that Islam and the Arab world made more cultural impacts on the Yorubas than Egypt did (Parrinder 1951:205–209). Parrinder accepted a partial influence of the Egyptian culture on the Yorubas. Parrinder says that much that has been discovered about the pre-dynastic and dynastic Egyptians could be written equally as well of the Yorubas and that such practices

include burial customs, coronation rituals, lack of formal mummification, probably no clothing except by ruling families who made drawers of goat- and deer-skins, animal skins used for clothing, tattooing of their bodies with lines and animal figures, and probably totemistic beliefs (Parrinder 1951:200, 202–203).

With regard to language structure, Lucas points at certain words that survived in pronunciation and in meaning in both Egyptian culture and among the Yorubas. Lucas says that the Egyptian word for hippopotamus is pronounced *Ririt* from which the Yoruba word *Riri*, “dirty”, is derived. He thinks that the derivation is due to the dirty nature of the hippopotamus on emerging from marshy waters (Lucas 1948:21–28). The word *Orisa* is used by the Yorubas to refer to a Supreme Deity, a deity or an idol. Lucas says that the word *Orisa* is actually derived from the ancient Egyptian form *Horu-sa-Ast* or *Horu-se-Ast* (Lucas 1970:411–412). Lucas (1948:261) thinks that both the Egyptians and the Yorubas use the words *Khu* or *oku* to mean death. For example, he says that the Yorubas believe that every human being possesses a *Khu* or *oku* which in Yoruba means “He or she dies”. In ancient Egypt, *Khu* meant to give up one’s spirit. The word used by the Yorubas for “spirit” or “spiritual soul” is *Emi(n)*. Lucas (1948:261) believes that the Yoruba word *Emi(n)* is used in the same sense as the Egyptian word *Khu* (Lucas 1948:261); he suggest that the Egyptians regarded *Khu* as a divine spiritual element in humans, in the same way that the Yorubas regard *Emi(n)*. Lucas (1948:261) connects the word *Emi(n)* to the ancient Egyptian god *Min*. He emphasised that the word *Emi(n)* can actually be transliterated to mean “that which belongs to *Min*”¹⁶ the Coptos god of ancient Egypt. He thinks that the Yorubas had contact with the Coptos in ancient Egypt, where the Egyptian deity *Min* was worshipped.

In terms of customs, both cultures practiced polygamy and the first wife was given a special role and was regarded as more important than the other wives. The Yorubas call her *Iyale*, “mistress of the house”, a title corresponding in significance to the *nabit piru* (the mistress’ crown) of the ancient Egyptians (Lucas 1948:28–30). Body

¹⁶ Temples were made in ancient Egypt for the worship of *Min*. One of the temples was located in Akhmim where Yuya served as a priest and his wife served as the mistress of the robes in the same temple (Partridge 1994:102).

mutilations practiced in ancient Egypt also found their way to the Yorubas. These practices included circumcision, excision, piercing of ears and nose, tattooing, and shaving (Agai 2014a:4). In addition, the many similarities that exist between the ancient Egyptians and the Yoruba in terms of burial practices have made a number of writers think that the Egyptians were responsible for influencing or originating Yoruba burial culture.¹⁷ Umoh (1971:116), Johnson (1921:5–7) and Folorunso (2003:84) teach that the Yorubas and their cultures originated in Egypt. Agai (2013a:1) says that while he was in Yorubaland, many Yorubas he interviewed said they originated in Egypt except a few who said they originated in Mecca.¹⁸ Despite the afterlife cultural

¹⁷ The ancient Egyptians believed, as the Yorubas do, that a befitting burial for the deceased affects the relationship between the living and the dead (Lucas 1948:253). The social roles of people in this life are assumed to be maintained in the afterlife by both cultures (Adamolekun 2001:610; El-Shahawy 2005:78). In addition, in both ancient Egypt and among the Yorubas, servants, wives of kings, and loyalists of leaders were buried together with their masters (Awolalu 1979:56–57). At a later stage, sculptures/images and animals' blood were used for burial to represent the king's loyalists among the Yorubas, just as the Egyptians who buried their loved ones using images and statues in order to represent the king's loyalists. Because death was regarded as a journey, ancient Egyptians buried their leaders together with items like clothing, ceremonial oils, canopic jars, water, food and charms (James 1976:158–159). The Yorubas did likewise by burying their kings and wealthy people with items like clothing, food, water, jewellery, silver and money (Awolalu 1979:56–57). The Yorubas used to wrap their corpses to look like the Egyptian mummies and they buried the kings' slaves, wives, and chief officers together with the king. Yet this practice is replaced by burying corpses with *Ushabtis* figures both among the Yorubas and the Egyptians (Lucas 1948:28–30). Like the Egyptians who, at a later stage, began to enlarge the grave-size of their leaders in order to include burial goods (Murnane 1992:35; Partridge 1994:6–7), the Yorubas did likewise by enlarging their graves to accompany burial goods (Awolalu 1979:56–57). Pre-dynastic Egyptians wrapped the bodies of their deceased in mats (James 1976:155) just as the Yorubas did in the past (Awolalu 1979:172). Although both the Yorubas and the Egyptians regarded the heart as the "seat of intelligence" some Yorubas removed the heart of a deceased, not to be stored in a canopic jar as it was done in Egypt (Otey 2004), but to be eaten by the king's successor and, in this case, the heart signified the deceased's divinity and power which would be transferred to his successor (Lucas 1948:252–253). The Egyptians, on the other hand, removed the internal organs of the deceased's body leaving behind the heart inside the body which they believed would be judged in the afterlife (James 1976:157–160; El-Shahawy 2005:75–77). For the Yorubas, the heart played a greater role in the afterlife than the body which they believed dissolved at death. For the Egyptians, the deceased body was equally important because they believed it would resurrect in its physical form hence the mummification of bodies (Partridge 1994:8).

¹⁸ Lucas Olumide is one of the main proponents of the Egyptian theory. While he commended non-native writers of Yoruba history, he equally faulted them for not having adequate

similarities that exist between the Yorubas and the Egyptians, Agai (2013a:8–9) pointed at some other ways in which their culture differs. With regard to mummification, the belief in reincarnation, fear of the spirit of the dead and the building of pyramids, the ancient Egyptians differ from the Yorubas.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY IN THE SEARCH FOR YORUBA ORIGINS

While the Oduduwa legend teaches that Oduduwa originally came from Mecca or the East, Johnson (1921:5) argues that neither the Yorubas nor their ancestor Oduduwa descended directly from Mecca. Johnson explains how Belo believed that the Yarba (probably Yoruba) were the remnants of the children of Canaan, who were of the tribe of Nimrod:¹⁹

The inhabitants of this province (Yarba) it is supposed originated from the remnant of the children of Canaan, who were of the tribe of Nimrod. The cause of their establishment in the West of Africa was, as it is stated, in consequence of their being driven by Yar-rooba, son of Kahtan, out of Arabia to the Western Coast between Egypt and Abyssinia. From that spot they advanced into the interior of Africa, till they reached Yarba where they fixed their residence. On their way they left in every place they stopped at, a tribe of their own people. Thus it is supposed that all the tribes of the Soudan who inhabit the mountains are originated from them as also are the inhabitants of Ya-ory. Upon the whole, the people of Yarba are nearly of the same description as those of Noofee (Nupe). (Johnson 1921:5–6)

knowledge and the language hence their report cannot be accurate. He thinks that his etymological comparisons between the Egyptians and the Yorubas are accurate: “Suffice it here to tender an apology, once for all, for these criticisms which are necessitated by a desire to give an accurate account of the subject” (Lucas 1948:5–6). Lange refutes Lucas’ view by saying that Lucas’ etymologies seemingly lacks scholastic or critical criticisms: “His proposed etymologies are however very vague and since neither the assumed phonetic and semantic similarities are convincing, they cannot be accepted as evidence for historical reconstruction” (Lange 2004:311).

¹⁹ Yet, it is not known which Nimrod both Johnson and Belo wrote about.

Johnson (1921:6) arguably and inconsistently believes that this extract sheds light on the legend concerning the origin of the Yorubas. He stresses that the popular Yoruba name Lamurudu (Namurudu) is a dialectical modification of the name Nimrod whose descendants, the Phoenicians, were led in war to Arabia. They fled religious persecution in Arabia and migrated to Africa in Yarba, their first permanent settlement. Johnson believes that Yoruba ancestors were originally Phoenicians-Egyptians who became Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt (Nubia) or who had some distorted knowledge of Christianity; and that they passed through Arabia where they were equally persecuted before migrating to West Africa hence they were not influenced by strict Arabian culture.²⁰ Johnson thinks that there is no Arabian record that proves that the Yorubas originated from Mecca and that “an event of such importance could hardly have passed unnoticed by their [Arabian] historians” (Johnson 1921:5). Johnson (1921:5) stressed that past historians regarded Mecca as east and that there was indeed a strong affinity between the Yorubas and the east but that the “east” means “Egypt” and not “Mecca”: “The Yorubas came originally from the east there cannot be the slightest doubt, as their habits, manners and customs, etc., all go to prove” (Johnson 1921:5). He pointed to the similarities in form between “Ife Marbles”²¹ and Egyptian sculptures, stating that about three or four of the forms of these sculptures can be seen in the Egyptian Court of the British Museum, “showing at a glance that they are among kindred works of art” (Johnson 1921:6–7). Folorunso (2003:83) sided with Johnson’s view and said that whenever “Mecca” or “East” is mentioned with regard to Yoruba origins, it thus implies Egypt. The question once more arises: Did Egypt or Mecca or the Phoenicians or the Israelites originate or influenced Yoruba culture?

One of the main reasons for the tradition that the Yorubas and their culture are of foreign sources is due to the ideology that West Africans never had their own civilisation before the emergence of the Nok culture (500 B.C.E.–200 A.D.); and as a

²⁰ Parrinder (1951:201–203) thinks that the Arabs likewise Islam influenced Yoruba people more than any other culture. In principle, Johnson thought Mohammed Belo associated Yoruba origins with Mecca to promote Islamic course (cf. Folorunso 2003:84).

²¹ Frobenius (1913) on the other hand linked Ife arts to Plato’s “Atlantis” suggesting a Greek origin (cf. Folorunso 2003:78).

result many tribes in West Africa began to associate their origin and the origin of their culture to some ancient civilised race(s). For example, the Ibos (south-east Nigeria) have a tradition which teaches that they and their culture originated in Israel (Umoh 1971:163–164) while the Hausas (northern Nigeria) say Bayajidda their ancestor originated in Canaan (Lange 2004:215–216). The various theories for the origin of Yoruba culture emerged, because the Yorubas and other writers of Yoruba history think that the technological standards of Yoruba arts cannot be of West African origin. Frobenius, a trained anthropologist and an explorer has been described as the first anthropologist to advertise Ile Ife's (in Yorubaland) terracotta arts to the world. He visited Ile Ife in 1910 and conducted research on Yoruba sculptures. Frobenius was amazed at the high level of creativity he found in Yoruba arts and, as a result, he reported to the German press that there was some presence of Greek colony on the Atlantic coast of Africa (cf. Olupona 1993:242). Frobenius thought that Yoruba civilisation is not of African origin, but of European or Etruscan sources (Frobenius 1913:345).

In addition, Dr Saburi Oladeni Biobaku (1918–2001), a renowned Yoruba historiographer, a former director of the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme, Nigeria, and a specialist on the works of Reverend Samuel Johnson insisted adamantly that “the Yoruba are not indigenous to Nigeria” (Biobaku n.d.:63). Biobaku was not specific on the direct origin of the Yorubas; rather, he thinks that various ancient Near Eastern or Middle Eastern cultures influenced Yoruba culture:

... they [Yorubas] were immigrants from a region where they came under the influences of ancient Egyptians, Etruscan and Jews. Their original home must have been the Near East, and it is probable that the all-Black Kingdom of Meroe in the Sudan played an important part in transmitting Egyptian influences to them. Whether it was in Upper Egypt or the Yemen, the Yoruba came under Arab influences in their old homes, and their subsequent migration was connected with Arab movements. (Biobaku n.d.:63–64)

There is little or no doubt that traces of Jews or Etruscan or Egyptian cultures are

visible among the Yorubas; apart from Islamic traditions which have some syncretism with Arab culture, direct practice of Arabian culture especially of burial among the Yorubas are very meagre and almost unavailable. More so, Yoruba writers like Johnson, Lucas and many others emphasised the similarities of Egyptian culture and that of the Yorubas, and they de-emphasised the extensive dissimilarity which exists between these two cultures (Agai 2011:195; Agai 2013a:8–9). However, further study of cultural comparison could still contribute positively in the search for the origins of specific ethnic groups hence needs not to be neglected in historical research. Other implications of this research on the search for Yoruba origins are that:

1. Lucas and Parrinder believe that the cultures that are similar between the Egyptians and the Yorubas are basically Egyptian pre-dynastic and dynastic cultures hence they think that the contact between the Egyptians and the Yorubas took place during the pre-dynastic and dynastic periods (Parrinder 1951:200, 202–203; cf. Lucas 1970: iii). On the contrary, scholars dated the migration of Oduduwa and his crew sometime after 622 A.D., perhaps around 1100 A.D. (Afolaya 2004:33) or sometime around the seventh through the tenth century A.D. (Oyebade 2004:53). Besides, the legend teaches that Oduduwa found people living in Yorubaland and the people must have had their own cultural practices before Oduduwa came. The origins of the people that occupied Yorubaland before Oduduwa came are not known (Ayandele 2004:123), however, other Yoruba writers are speculating that the earliest occupiers of Yorubaland were the Igbos who were chased by Oduduwa from Ile Ife (Afolayan 2004:32; Oyebade 2004:57–58). The argument above suggests that culture has chronological impacts in the study of Yoruba origins.
2. The findings at a cave in Iwo Eleru in 1965 are the oldest human remains found in Yorubaland and the burial of the skeletal remains found is associated with microlithic industry; preliminary investigation suggests that the remains are negroid in character (Clark 1970:165). There is no evidence that the remains are of Yoruba ancestors but the presence of the remains suggests that the earliest occupiers of Yorubaland who may or may not be Yorubas themselves had

knowledge of the afterlife or burial over 12 000 years ago (Falola & Heaton 2010:19; Omolewa 2008: 15).²² The findings at Iwo Eleru also suggest that the people that lived in Yorubaland had their culture before Oduduwa came.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be said that the evidence for a contact between the Yorubas and the Egyptians, the Etruscans, the Jews, the Phoenicians, the Arabians during the pre-dynastic and dynastic periods or before the fourteenth century A.D. is not available at present. Maybe future research may reveal possible evidence for Semitic or Egyptian influences on the Yorubas, but not at the moment. It is for this reason that Oyeniya Bukola Adeyemi surmised that the Yoruba creation myth lacks evidence, and that there is no any Arabian record which supports the migration of some Arabians to Yorubaland. Adeyemi notes that these two accounts of Yoruba origin should rather be read metaphorically and not as historical facts (Adeyemi 2012:47). Ayandele (2004:123) also says that Oduduwa legend is not aimed at tracing Yoruba origins but rather to show that in Yoruba history, a monarch named Oduduwa existed and flourished in Ile Ife. The assertions by both Adeyemi and Ayandele suggest that a study of the origin of Yoruba culture is relevant in the study of Yoruba history especially in the search for their origins.

Furthermore, the study of the origin of Yoruba culture which discusses the ideology of foreign influences among the Yorubas clearly contributes in evaluating the strength and the weaknesses of the hypothesis which says that the Yorubas originate from Egypt or from Mecca or from Israel or from Arabia or from Etruscan sources. This is a plus in the study of Yoruba origins. It is also not a surprise that the Israelite, the Arabian and the Etruscan theses for Yoruba origin are gradually becoming unpopular. It is also likely that the Yorubas and their culture did not originate independently but from other sources, and while their cultural connection to the ancient Egyptians supersedes their connections to other regions of the ancient Near

²² In ancient Egypt, it is said that the afterlife beliefs emerged probably during the pre-dynastic periods (8300–4500 B.C.E.) (Scheepers & Scheffler 2000:Glossary).

East or the Etruscans, the absence of a migration route between ancient Egypt and ancient Yorubaland, the absence of a written record in Egypt concerning Egyptian migration to Yorubaland, and the absence of specific peoples or cultures that are direct descendants or direct cultures of the Egyptians in Yorubaland suggest that the Egyptian-thesis for Yoruba origin requires further study despite the fact the thesis appears attractive. The general study of the theories for the origin of Yoruba culture is the main reason which gave the Egyptian thesis for Yoruba origin a special recognition, and it has also contributed in developing the tradition which teaches that the Yorubas originated in Egypt.

In conclusion, there is at the moment no evidence that the Yorubas originated from Egypt or from any part of the ancient Near East. This is one of the reasons why some contemporary historiographers are disregarding the transcontinental theories for the origins of Yoruba culture. Africanist historians are beginning to think that colonial influences are responsible for making some pre-colonial and colonial African historians associate Yoruba civilisation and origin with long-distance migration either from Egypt, the ancient Near East or other non-African territories (cf. Lange 1995:39). In a similar manner, this researcher intended to encourage the study of Yoruba origins from within the regions of West Africa for the following reasons:

1. As stated earlier, language is a paramount historical tool or evidence. The Yoruba language belonged to the Kwa group and despite the few divergences, many other West African groups share similarities in language with the Yorubas (Lange 1995:44). For example, *Ku* in Berom (from North-Central Nigeria) means “death”; the Yorubas, the Ewe, the Grebo and the Sekiri likewise use the word *Ku* for “death” or “die” (cf. Lucas 1970:263–264).
2. The Yoruba people share common language and cultural similarities among themselves but they were initially not living together until they saw the need to do so.

The Yoruba did not always see themselves as belonging to one group with a common destiny and aspirations. They were divided up into strong sub-ethnic groups amongst which were the Akoko, Eghba, Eghado, Ekiti,

Ijebu, Ijesa, Ondo, Owo and Oyo. In spite of the acceptance by all these groups that the Yoruba derived from Ile –Ife, and despite the fact that they all understood each other’s dialect, loyalty to the existing sub-ethnic groups was strong. (Omolewa 2008:124)

3. It can therefore be suggested that the Yorubas might have been a collection of peoples with similar cultures including language from within West Africa who chose to settle in what is today referred to as Yorubaland. The Yorubas were distributed also in other West African states long before the formal advent of slave trade by Western powers.
4. It was easier to migrate within the West African region than from Egypt or from the ancient Near East to the Yorubaland.
5. The West African peoples and the Yorubas share many more cultural similarities with other West African people than they do with the Egyptians or Semitic peoples or the Etruscans.
6. The Ife Bronze Head and the Nok terracottas were previously denied West African indigenous origin. Guisepe (2001) says that the art of iron smelting and bronze casting in West Africa are said to have been originated by the Phoenicians or the Egyptians. Shaw (2004:36) says that the first metals to be used for tools and weapons were found in South-West Asia, Egypt and Europe and that the metals were basically bronze (copper + tin) hence “Nigeria was not touched by Bronze Age”. He emphasised that the knowledge of iron reached Nigeria only between 400 B.C.E. and 700 A.D. Both Guisepe and Shaw did not however deny some indigenous influences in West Africa arts (Shaw 2004:36). On the contrary, contemporary researchers are rather thinking that African civilisation might have started in West Africa as “archaeologists are looking at the possibility that West Africans developed iron-working technology autonomously, possibly starting with the Nok” (Atwood 2013:14). Contrary to popular beliefs, Agai (2014:4–6) also argues that the presence of cleavers, Acheulian tools and Early Stone Age tools in some parts of Nigeria are indications that early humans lived in Nigeria and have influenced the civilisations of modern humans in West Africa. This suggests

another disregard for the Egyptian, the Etruscan and the ancient Near Eastern origin of the Yorubas, but favours a possible West African origin of the Yorubas and their civilisation.

7. The Egyptian theory of Yoruba origin as proposed by Johnson, Lucas, and many other Yoruba writers is weak because their views also imply that all of West African tribes originate from Egypt. For example, Lucas published a book *Religions in West Africa and ancient Egypt* (1970). The book is aimed at showing clearly the influences of ancient Egyptian culture on the religions of West Africans inhabiting Ghana, Togoland, Dahomey and Southern Nigeria. Lucas believes that ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, emblems, symbols and formulae have survived in West Africa. He noted that the survivals are still in use especially in metaphysical outlook of life notably among the Ashanti, in Togoland, Yorubaland and Ekoiland (Lucas 1970:iii). It is questionable to accept that all tribes in West Africa originated or were influenced by the ancient Egyptians alone. It therefore makes sense to speculate that the Yorubas might have originated from West Africa or might have been more influenced by West Africans who are closer to them and share similar cultures with them than with the Egyptians. More research needs to be conducted on the chronology, the specific West African region and the tribe from which the Yorubas originated.

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