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بِوَسِيْلَةِ سُنَّتِيْ اِسْلَامِيٍّ اَبْنَاءِ اِيْجِيْبِيَّا مِلْدِيْنِيَّا

INVESTIGATIONS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE
YORÙBÁ IDENTITY: MYTH, HISTORY AND
RELIGION

BY

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Islamic
and other Civilizations)

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation deals with an enduring historical problem in the historiography of the Yoruba people of West Africa. Indeed, the origin of the Yorùbá people of south western Nigeria surrounded by lots of misconceptions and controversies. Therefore, this dissertation aims to prevent the new generation of Yorùbás from deceitful distortion which has increasingly become more difficult to resolve as we are exposed to the complex civilizations of the new contemporary world. This dissertation addresses the issue of the Yoruba origin from myth, history and religious perspective which I hope will by and large, lay to rest the hue and cry as well as haggling and quarrelling that had lingered for quite a long time. My training in Arabic language, and my knowledge of the Yoruba language as a native speaker both prepare me with understanding to explore significant research questions comprehensively.

ملخص البحث

يتناول هذا البحث مشكلة تاريخية دائمة في تأريخ شعب اليوروبا في غرب أفريقيا. في الواقع ، أصل قبائل اليوروبا في جنوب غرب نيجيريا يحيط به الكثير من سوء الفهم والخلافات. ولذلك، فإن هذا البحث يهدف إلى منع جيل اليوروبا الجديد من الوقوع في عدم الفهم والتشويه الخادع، الذي أصبح حله أكثر صعوبة في عرضه المعقد لحضارات العالم المعاصر. هذه الرسالة تتناول مسألة أصل قبائل اليوروبا من الأسطورة والتاريخ والدين، وأتمنى أن يضع ذلك حدا للعداء والشجار الذي استمرّ لفترة طويلة جدا. معرفتي باللغة العربية ، ومعرفتي بلغة اليوروبا باعتبارها اللغة الأم يؤهلني لفهم قضايا البحث الهامة بنحو شامل.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts (Islamic and other Civilizations).

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Ibrahim M. Zein
Dean of ISTAC

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Abdul Rofeeu Ibrahim

Signature

Date

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MYTH, HISTORY AND RELIGION**

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I dedicate this dissertation to my father Alhaji Imam Ibrahim Olayiwola, whose character and behavior demonstrated that love regardless of duplicity and limitations of human beings.

To Alhaji Sheikh Yunus Sanusi, founder of the Centre for Islamic and Arabic Studies,
Ikirun

To my lovely family

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

It is not only enough to know where one is going; it is equally important to take cognizance of where one is coming from so that adequate strategies might be put in place to arrive at the desired destination in view of the past history and the relevance of the present situation.¹

The origin of the Yorùbá identity has been an enduring historical controversy shrouded by a lot of hue and cry among Yorùbá historians of the West Africa, due to their belief that if individuals or groups fail to anchor themselves to a tradition, they can be easily uprooted, and reduced to people without past. Consequently, all their ancestral wisdoms and experiences will be washed away in modernity and lost in complex Civilizations of the new contemporary world. Indeed, many attempts have been made towards finding the origin and originality of Yorùbá identity by foreign scholars, as well as Yorùbás themselves, who have recorded a great deal about their own history. Unfortunately, all efforts to prevent Yorùbá traditions from going into extraction are fruitless. Perhaps, no aspect of the Yorùbá history is more controversial or ambiguous than their origin as it is conspicuous in many contradictory versions of the Yorùbá tradition of origin. There is no conclusive evidence to prove and claim exactly where their identity and culture were originated. As a result of this, some Yorùbás hold on to the assumption that *Ile-Ife*² is the first place on earth where all mankind originated. At the same time, some people stick to unreliable Cosmogonic

¹ Michael O. Fape, "National Anglican Identity Formation: An African Perspective," *Journal of Anglican Studies* Vol. 6, no. 1 (2008): 17-30.

² *Ile-Ife* is an ancient Yoruba city in south-western Nigeria. It is located in present day Osun State, with a population of 501,952.

stories, which assert many possibilities of origin that are more or less in consonance with the theory of evolution propounded by British naturalist Charles R. Darwin. In fact, the issue of how the term *Yorùbá* has become general identity for all Yorùbás has been a subject of controversy among scholars of the past, and this controversy will remain perennial and difficult for the future generation to resolve if we fail to do so today. Nevertheless, it is therefore, my humble attempt to proffer a long lasting solution to this lingering problem. Therefore, the thesis is focuses on the origin of Yorùbá people of the West Africa.

1.2 AIM AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The aims of this thesis is to get facts to prove the originality of Yorùbá identity, which I hope will prevent the new generation of Yorùbás from deceitful distortion which has increasingly become more difficult to resolve as we are exposed to the complex civilizations of the new contemporary world. Furthermore, looking at the issue of the origin of the Yorùbá identity from myth, history and religion perspective enables us to solve the contemporary controversies in our society. The objectives of this study are paraphrased below:

- To re-establish historical connection between Yorùbá people of West Africa and Yemen as their true origin.
- To contribute meaningfully to the body of existing knowledge on this subject matter.
- To reinforce further research on this subject matter.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

The thesis is mainly based on library collections where material and data will be extracted from books, articles, academic journals, monographs, verbal interviews and some relevant websites. From an Islamic perspective, the Holy Qur'an and the Bible are the main references, without overlooking the work of Muslim scholars, traditional and modern.

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Before the Yorùbá Kingdom became part of what is known as Nigeria today, the place was sited by group of people led by an *Oba* (king), the first settlement being *Ile-Ife*. As a result of their unlettered nature, the earliest history of the Yorùbá people of the West Africa was not recorded, but they kept it orally like most of other Eastern nations. Nevertheless, starting from 18th century the early scholars like Samuel Ajayi Crowther started to collect and record the Yorùbá traditions with the purpose of preserving the traditions from getting lost. They overlooked the existence of foreign element among Yorùbás at that time, and also they ignored the fact that oral transmissions bear different degree of reliability. For instance, Samuel Johnson declared in his Author's preface that '*what led to this production was not a burning desire of the author to appear in printbut a purely patriotic motive, that the history of our fatherland might not be lost in oblivion, especially as our old sires are fast dying out.*'³ Henceforward, the scholars after them took these collections as main source of their researches, without examining them in order to distinguish between folktales and true story. They recorded the story in their books according to what early

³ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, (Lagos: O. Johnson, 2001), viii.

scholars narrated. From this and that, the true story of Yorùbá identity was mingled with folktales and myths for centuries.

1.5 CONSEQUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS

The controversies of the origin of the Yoruba identity give some authors the chance to implant a number of dubious stories which has resulted to chaos and violence in Yorùbá society today. For instance, Abdulrazaq Dan-Baba Salau says in his work *‘Ancients Egyptian Origin of Yorùbá of West Africa a comprehensive scientific approach’*:

However, only a few of these non-Yorùbá-speaking people did not accept that they are Yorùbá, until recently Egba, Ijesha, Ijebu, Ekiti, or even Ife did not call themselves Yorùbá. Those regarded as ‘Yorùbá proper’ were the Oyo people; and it was their name that was used to eventually refer to all those people we call Yorùbá today. But sub-groups have maintained their respective identities.⁴

This shows that the issue of the Yorùbá identity has brought many controversies, because each group seeks to authenticate and superioritize its claims, as a consequence, the history of the Yorùbá of the West Africa suffered distortion for quite a long period. However, as a result of those dubious stories, some Yorùbá claim local origin and progenitor of the human race. At the same time, some people stick to the myths of migration which asserts that *Oduduwa* –the founder of Yorùbá kingdom– came down from eastern part of the world. Another account states that there were similarities to Jewish customs that identify the Yorùbá as one of the ten lost tribes of Israel.⁵ While others claim the Upper Egypt origin of the Yorùbá identity, some proclaim that their forefather came down from Mecca. All these arguments eventually

⁴ Abdulrazaq Dan-Baba Salau, “Ancients Egyptian Origin of Yoruba of West Africa: A comprehensive scientific approach,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 2007), 1.

⁵ Tope Olagbeaiye, “A descriptive analysis of modern structure of the Yoruba family as far back as Oduduwa period,” (M.A. Thesis, Windsor Ontario, 1983), 29.

led to controversies among the Yorùbás of West Africa. Nevertheless, I hope the result of this thesis will differentiate folktales from the history of Yorùbá identity and provide a more realistic, and less foggy, picture of the issue at hand.

1.6 PLAN AND SYNOPSIS

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I introduces the study and devoted to providing background information, aim and objective of the study, methodology, statement of the problem, consequences and implications. The literature review related to the area of the study and significance of the study are also discussed.

At the beginning of chapter II an attempt is made to explore the etymology of the term *Yorùbá*, whereby the issue of Hausa origin of the term Yorùbá is discerned, followed by an argument on ancient Egyptian or Arab origin of the term Yorùbá. This is followed by discussions on the origin of the Yorùbá identity and its mystery. Then the argument on the etymology of the term Oduduwa brings the second chapter to an end.

Chapter III focuses on mythological perspective of the Yorùbás origin. Then attention is drawn back to the Evolutionist perspective of the origin of man, thereby ending chapter three with Biblical and Qur'anic view of the origin of Man, which refutes the theory that Ile-Ife is the first land where mankind originated on earth and that Oduduwa was the first mankind.

In chapter IV, attention is focuses on the theory of migration in Yorùbá historical accounts. Here, the issue of the Mecca origin of Yorùbá people is critically examined along with argument on Ancient Egyptian origin of Yorùbás, argument on Iranian origin of Yorùbás, argument on Jewish origin of Yorùbás, argument on Medina origin of Yorùbás and argument on Palestine and Kanian origin of Yorùbás

and finally, critical evaluation of Yemeni origin of Yorùbá people and the role of Oduduwa in Yorùbá society. Chapter V of this project proves and substantiates the intertwine between Yorùbá and Arab culture.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There are lots of misconceptions and controversies about the origin of the Yorùbá people of south western Nigeria. Such misconceptions and controversies have occasioned alot of problems. This thesis is therefore aimed to propose solution based on a comparative survey of the myths, historical accounts and religious sources – biblical as well as Qur’anic. It is hoped that the study will provide a clearer and less disputed account with respect to the real identity and origins of the Yoruba people.

1.8 LITERATURE REVIEW

Yorùbá people of the West Africa have been subject of interest to many foreign scholars because of their military and political power which empowered by the highest morality. Many scholars have made numerous attempts and bold steps to trace the origin of Yorùbá culture; Yorùbás themselves have written a great deal about their own traditions. I shall begin my review of the subject with Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther.

In 1852, the reality of the matter has been addressed by Samuel Ajayi Crowther in his book ‘*A Grammar of the Yorùbá language*’ in which he relates that sixteen persons were sent from an unknown region by a personage, and a small piece of black cloth with something tied up on it was presented to *Okambi* who was sixteenth person. According to the given instruction, the cloth being opened, a palm nut, which was deposited in it with some earth, fell into the water. The nut grew

immediately into a tree, which had sixteen branches. They climbed it up to replenish their strength in order to proceed on their journey. The small piece of cloth was opened again and some earth dropped into water and became a small bank, then the fowl, which was given to Okambi flew upon it and scattered it on the water which immediately dried up. Then Okambi descended from the palm-tree, afterward the place was known as *Ile-Ife* in which the kingdom of Yorùbá originated⁶. However, Oduduwa (who is considered to be the founder of the Yorùbá Kingdom) is omitted in this earliest version of Yorùbá cosmogonic story.

In 1897, Samuel Johnson in '*The History of the Yorùbás*'⁷ suggested that Yorùbá people originated from *Lamurudu* one of the Mecca kings. According to him, Lamurudu was vanquished and slain by Prophet Muhammad's party, and his children were banished from Mecca with those who sympathized with them. The Princess who became king of Gobir and Kukawa went westwards and the Oduduwa went eastwards to Ile Ife. He also postulates the possibility of Upper Egypt origin of Yorùbá people which can be proved by "Ife Marbles" and several of handiworks of the early ancestors of the Yorùbás, and the most notable of them is '*Opa Oranmiyan*,'⁸ As a matter of fact, the above theory needs to be stressed upon, because Samuel Johnson postulates more than one origin for Yorùbá people of West Africa.

In 1948, after pioneering efforts of Samuel Johnson, the eastern origin of Yorùbá was rejected by Olumide Lucas, who proclaimed the Ancient Egyptian origin of Yorùbás in his book, '*The Religion of the Yorùbás*'. Indeed, his observation focuses on the religious dimension of Yorùbá culture. He compares Ancient Egypt with Yorùbá culture and shows similarities of their languages and religious ideas, beliefs,

⁶ S. Ajayi Crowther, *Grammar of the Yoruba language*, (London: No p, 1852), i-ii.

⁷ This book was written originally in 1897 but published in 1921.

⁸ Samuel Johnson, 3-7.

and practices. According to Lucas the survival of customs, names, persons, places and objects in Yorùbá cultures which are ancient Egyptian in origin lead him to conclude that Yorùbás originated from Ancient Egypt.⁹ This idea lacks concrete evidence and the notion requires further investigation.

In 1958 Saburi Biobaku made another attempt to deal with the issue of the Yorùbá genesis. In *Africa South*, Volume 2, no 2, pp 63-64, he asserts that the Yorùbás were immigrants from the Near East where they came under influences of Ancient Egyptians and Jews. He also postulates that whether in Upper Egypt or Yemen, Yorùbá received influences from the Arab in their old home, and their subsequent migration was connected with the Arabs movement.¹⁰ This is an inadequate proposition because the specific place where Yorùbá emigrated to Ile-Ife is not mentioned.

In 1967, Adetugbo Abiodun reviewed the work of Samuel Johnson, Olumide Lucas and Professor Sabri Biobaku in his Ph.D dissertation; '*The Yorùbá Language in Western Nigeria: Its major dialect Areas*'. He criticized their view of the Yorùbá origin that; these writers claim that the Yorùbás migrated to the Western Nigeria from the Middle East. The three sources contradict one another, and out of the three, only Biobaku is free from internal contradictions.¹¹ Nevertheless, according to Abiodun, only Biobaku is more cautious than others in his deduction, but his notion of the Yorùbá origin suffers from the same malady which beset the others.

In 1973, an article was published by the Journal of African History, titled '*the heritage of Oduduwa: Traditional history and political propaganda among the Yorùbá*' by Robin. C. C. Law. This article claims that Ile-Ife is the site of the creation.

⁹ Olumide J. Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas*, (Lagos: C.M.S. Bookshop, 1948., 14.

¹⁰ Sabri Biobaku, "The pattern of Yoruba history," *Africa South*, Vol 2, no 2, Pp 63-64.

¹¹ Adetugbo Abiodun, "Yoruba Language in Western Nigeria: Its major dialect Areas," (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1967), 231.

It also postulates that Oduduwa is immigrant from outside Yorùbá land. The following quotation summarizes his view of the Yorùbá origin;

Ile Ife is presented as the site of the creation of the habitable world, from which all mankind dispersed over the earth. The surface of the earth was covered with water, and Oduduwa descended by a chain from heaven to create the dry land. Other traditions represent Oduduwa as an immigrant from outside Yorùbáland who settled at Ile Ife. The best known version of the 'migration' tradition that was given in Johnson's History of the Yorùbás, brings Oduduwa from Mecca. Others locate the Yorùbá homeland rather nearer, for example in Nupe, the immediate northeastern neighbour of Yorùbáland. Some traditions seem to represent a fusion of the 'creation' and 'migration' versions: according to these, the ancestors of the Yorùbá migrated from another land, came to a vast expanse of water across which they set out either by wading or by canoe, and ultimately created dry land in the middle of it. It is possible that the 'Creation' and 'migration' versions of the Yorùbá tradition of origin originally referred to distinct indigenous and immigrant elements in the population.¹²

Perhaps, Robin Law agrees with all possibilities of origin of the Yorùbá people, but his ideas are not backed with conclusive evidence.

In 1978, Yorùbá origin was traced back to Kisra¹³ (Chosroes II) by John Donnelly Fage and William Tordoff in their book '*A History of Africa*'. The story line goes as follows. Kisra was the king of the Parsi or Baghdadshi (i.e. Persians) who occupied Egypt, but then was forced to flee up the Nile to 'Nupata', where he asked to be allowed to settle. The King of Napata advised that Kisra should be asked to conquer the West, and that King of Nupata should follow him. Kisra went off and eventually reached the Benue and Niger valleys, while the King of Nupata arrived in Gobir (northern Hausaland) where he founded a kingdom from which all the Hausa state are derived. Kisra died at Bussa (north-west Nigeria), but he or his followers were responsible for the foundation of the kingdoms of Burgu (in North West Nigeria and adjacent Dahomey), Nupe (north of the Niger Benue confluence), of Kwararafa or

¹² R. C. C. Law, "The heritage of Oduduwa: Traditional history and political propaganda among the Yoruba." *Journal of African History*, (Great Britain: Cambridge press, 1973), 208-222.

¹³ Kisra is Chosroes (Khosru) II, the Sassanid ruler of Persia from 590 to 628.

Jukun (on the Benue), and, further south, of Igala and Yorùbáland.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, Kisra is not known throughout Yorùbá historical account neither in myth of creation nor in myth of migration. Therefore, the notion needs deep investigation.

In 1978, Philip Curtin and Steve Feuerman in their book '*Africa History From Earliest Times to Independence*' prove with archeological evidences that Homo sapients emerged between 200,000 and 120,000 years ago in Africa, and Stone age which can be back dated to around 2,300 B.C was founded in Africa at Gwisho near the Kafue river in Zambia. Hence, the earlier Pharaonic times in Egypt around 2000 B.C was great evidence of Bronze Age in Africa.¹⁵ These archeological evidences back African historians to claim that Africans have lived in the area for long period. However, the concerning matter is; are they local origin or immigrants? This question should be answered in order to know in which context the origin of the Yorùbá of the West Africa should be located.

In 1983, Tope Olagbaiye in his Dissertation; '*A Descriptive Analysis of Modern Structure of the Yorùbá Family as far as Oduduwa Period,*' refers to three mythological origins that were suggested by W. Bascom for the Yorùbá of the West Africa.

First, there were similarities to Jewish customs that identify the Yorùbá as one of the 'ten lost tribes' of Israel.

Second, that the great works of art from Ife was first reported by Leo Frobenius; indicating that the Yorùbá culture had been introduced by Etruscans who reached West Africa by way of the lost continent of Atlantis.

¹⁴ John Donnelly Fage with William Tordoff, *A History of Africa*, (London: Routage 2002), 61-62.

¹⁵ Philip Curtin and Steve Feuerman, *Africa History from Earliest Times to Independence*, (London: Longman, 1995), 1-2-21.

Third, that Sir Flinders Petrie noted the resemblance of these heads of pottery ones from Memphis that suggested an Egyptian origin of the Yorùbás.¹⁶

In any way, none of these suggestions offer conclusive evidence to authenticate the Yorùbás Origin.

In 1989, the Journal of African History published an article by ‘*Iwe Itan Oyo*’ entitled ‘*A Traditional Yorùbá history and its author*’ by Toyin Falola and Michel R. Doortmont. This article claims the Medina origin of the Yorùbás, in accordance with ‘*A history of old and new Oyo*’ by M. C. Adeyemi 1914 which claims:

The Yorùbá came from Medina, in the east. Initially, the Yorùbá settled with the Ibariba. After some time, the Ibariba began to make life uncomfortable for them. In addition, the Yorùbá did not understand the Ibariba's language and consequently they decided to leave the Ibariba country for another place.¹⁷

However, in the history of Medina there is nothing which indicates that Yorùbá and Oduduwa is known, and also nothing is found in Yorùbá historical account which indicates Madina origin of Yorùbás.

On top of that, in 1989, Kevin Shillington proclaims in his book ‘*History of Africa,*’ that; Since the 1950s, scientific research in the dry savannah grasslands and woodlands of southern, eastern and northern Africa have provided sufficient evidence to confirm the truth of Darwin’s proposition that Africa is the cradle of Humankind. According to him, it seems that Africa is the origin not only of the human species itself, but also of many of the more important technological innovations developed in the ancient world of early human prehistory. Furthermore, he claims that early form of modern man, Homo sapiens (wise men), with a brain capacity of 1300 to 1400 cc, appear to have evolved, again in Africa between about 200 000 and 100 000 years

¹⁶ Tope Olagnaiye, 29-30.

¹⁷ Toyin Falola and Michel R. Doortmont, “ Iwe Itan Oyo: A traditional Yoruba history and its author.” *Journal of African History*, (Great Britain: Cambridge University, 1989), 301-329.

ago, by which time all other hominids had become extinct. Final evolution of modern human beings (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), with average brain capacity of about 1450 cc, was clearly completed by 40 000 BC. Originating from Africa, they had spread to all major regions of the world by 10,000 BC.¹⁸ Obviously, it is understandable that Kevin Shillington claims the local origin of all Africa, which needs to be investigated.

In 1991, (*Asil Qbāil Yorùbá wa Qbāil almujawara lah fī Nigeria*) (أصل قبائل (يوربا والقبائل المجاورة لها في نيجيريا), Al-Alūri asserts that the remains of Bani Yā‘rub bin Qahtān (بني يعرب بن قحطان) emigrated from Yemen to the mid and north-east of Africa, to join their brothers who preceded them in the first Arab immigration to what is known today as Africa. This second immigration was led by Afrikish bin Aburah al-Himiari (أفريقيش بن أبرهة الحميري). According to his conclusion, the rest of the Arab Al-Ariba is known today as Yorùbá people of the West Africa.¹⁹ The original text is quoted below.

انهم من بقايا بني يعرب بن قحطان الذين نزحوا من اليمن
وانحدروا من موجات الهجرة الثانية بقيادة أفريقيش الحميري
واستفاضوا في أواسط أفريقيا والشمال الشرقي منها والتقوا
باخوانهم العرب البائدة الذين سبقوهم في الهجرة الأولي²⁰

This view is widely accepted by scholars, but all Yorùbás accept that Oduduwa is the founder of the Yorùbás kingdom not Yaruba bin Qahtān himself. Now the question is; what is the relation between Oduduwa -who Yorùbás considered as founder of their culture- and Yaruba bin Qahtān? The question must be answered in order to authenticate the origin of the Yorùbás.

¹⁸ Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, (London: Macmillan, 1989), 4-5.

¹⁹ Adam Abdullah Al-Ālūri “Asil Qubail Yoruba wa Qubail almujawara lah fi Nigeria” (Cairo :Matiba Zahara,1991),115.

²⁰ Ibid, 115.