

## A. O. ADÉSOJÍ

### The Odùduwà Myth and the Farce of Yorùbá Unity

#### Introduction

The Yorùbá people, with a population of about twenty-five million, constitute one of the largest single ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. They are spread across four West African countries, Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and Sierra Leone, the largest concentration being in Nigeria. The Yorùbá people in Nigeria, the focus of this study, are the dominant group in south-western Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> With the carving of the Nigerian Federation into smaller states, the Yorùbá came fully to occupy six states, namely Lagos, Ògùn, Òyó, Òşun, Oñdó, and Èkìtì. Kwara and Kogi, which were carved out of the former Northern Region, are partly Yorùbá states. The Yorùbá, though culturally homogenous, were differentiated into regional sub-groups, like the Òyó, Ìjèbú, Ifè, Èkìtì, Ègbá, Ìjèşà, Oñdó, Ìkálè, Ìlàje, Àkókó and others, obviously from very early times.

The peopling of Yorùbáland has been explained differently, ranging from the most fanciful to the most plausible. These accounts include the story of direct descent from heaven or the sky as popularised by traditional historians, and stories of migrations from different places as stressed by professional or academic historians.<sup>2</sup> However, both

the stories of creation and of migrations emphasise the importance of Odùduwà in the emergence and spread of the Yorùbá as a group. At the same time, some of the traditions hint at the existence of some autochthonous groups beginning from Ilé-Ifè (which is generally acknowledged as the cradle of Yorùbá civilisation) before the emergence of Odùduwà.

Without gainsaying this, the emergence of Odùduwà radically transformed the Yorùbá society, particularly with the centralisation of political authority and the adoption of Arè or Adé (beaded crown) as a symbol of royal authority.<sup>3</sup> This important innovation eventually became the basis for identifying the direct descendants of Odùduwà and also for legitimising political authority or kingship in Yorùbáland, both in the past and the present. However, the revolution associated with the arrival of Odùduwà did not obliterate the existence of the autochthonous group or their traditions. This perhaps explains why references are still made to them up to the present time.<sup>4</sup> It would seem that the popularisation of the Odùduwà legend portrays an attempt to write the history of political leaders or the elite in Yorùbáland, particularly to the detriment of the masses. This observation is corroborated by the portrayal of Odùduwà as an external force with considerable might and will with which he imposed himself on the autochthonous groups, such that the history of Ilé-Ifè and by extension that of the Yorùbá became woven around him from thenceforward. In addition, the use to which the Odùduwà factor has been put in contemporary Yorùbáland and Nigeria as a whole confirms this observation.

In the context of Yorùbá history and politics, the elite comprises individuals who are considered as—or those who put themselves up as—leaders because of the power, talents or privileges which they enjoy. Often the exalted position which they occupy,

whether through selection or election, or by achievement or ascription, has placed them in a position of vantage to make decisions on behalf of, or give direction to, the Yorùbás. Furthermore their aspiration for a leadership position is frequently justified by their self-imposed desire, or the duty placed on them by the Yoruba masses, to articulate and defend their interests. Included therefore in the elite class have been the traditional rulers, like the Obas and Chiefs who belong to the traditional wing of the elite class, and the educated ones—the economic gurus as well as the politicians—who constitute the modern elite.

Obviously, the impression which the Yorùbá elite wanted to create and foster in the contemporary period is that the Yorùbá nation is a united and indivisible group, notwithstanding the glaring differences between the various Yorùbá sub-groups and their perception of one another. Besides, the manner in which the elite went about it polarised Yorùbáland. It is therefore not surprising that achieving unity in Yorùbáland has become onerous.

### **The Odùduwà Factor and the Quest for Yorùbá Unity**

A recapitulation of the Odùduwà legend is not attempted here, as it is widely documented in literature.<sup>5</sup> However, it is to be emphasised that the Odùduwà factor became a rallying point of unity, or was used as such by the elite, in the contemporary period. Meanwhile, as in the distant past when there was an autochthonous group, or groups, claiming direct descent from heaven, so it is in the contemporary period. Adediran identifies three such communities that claimed direct descent from the skies. These are Òbà-Ilé near Àkùré, Òbà-Ìgbómìnà and Igbó-Ìdàìsà in the present-day Republic of Benin.<sup>6</sup> A contemporary equivalent of this development is the claim by the Ìjẹ̀bù sub-group of the Yorùbá that

they migrated from Wadai and had nothing to do with Ilé-Ifè or Odùduwà.<sup>7</sup> Beyond all these, and greater than any other factor, one indisputable fact is the cultural homogeneity of all Yorùbá sub-groups, as seen in the relative similarity of their Yorùbá language and culture.

It would seem that the Odùduwà factor was not a dominant issue in the history and politics of the Yorùbá until the late 1940s when it was revived or perhaps contrived. A number of factors could account for this development. Beginning from 1821, Yorùbáland was engulfed in fratricidal wars that lasted till the end of the century.<sup>8</sup> The last of them were the Èkitiparapò wars, fought between the alliance of the Èkitì, Ìjẹ̀sà and Ifẹ̀, on one hand, and the almighty Ibadan, on the other. Obviously fought to throw off the yoke of Ibadan domination, the fighting provided the needed excuse for the British incursion into the interior of Yorùbáland. Beyond the polarisation of Yorùbáland into military camps, the hostility which the war generated profoundly affected interactions among the Yorùbá states as well as their unity. Even before the outbreak of the civil wars, different Yorùbá kingdoms enjoyed a considerable measure of autonomy in the running of their affairs. Also, despite the link of many Yorùbá kingdoms with Ilé-Ifè and the claim that they got their beaded crown from Ifẹ̀, it would seem that traditional rulers in pre-colonial Yorùbáland were highly revered.<sup>9</sup> In consequence, they hardly appeared in public except during important festivals. This therefore limited their interaction not only with their subjects but also with other kingdoms.

The emergence of Egbé Ọmọ Odùduwà in the mid 1940s marked the revival of the Odùduwà factor in Yorùbá history and politics. Founded as a cultural organisation in London in 1945 by Ọbáfẹ̀mi Awólówò and a group of Yorùbá students, it was formally

inaugurated in 1948.<sup>10</sup> In addition to emphasising the particular needs of the Yorùbá, the resolve of the association was to unite the various groups of the Yorùbá race and generally create and foster the spirit of a single nationalism in Yorùbáland.<sup>11</sup> Beyond promoting the study of the Yorùbá language, culture and history and mediating in disputes among several Yorùbá Obas and between warring communities, the association engaged in political activities. Not surprisingly, the leaders of the association were among the founding fathers of the Action Group (A.G.), a political party that was formed in 1951.<sup>12</sup> Not only did the A.G. dominate politics in Western Nigeria till the end of Nigeria's First Republic, its leader became something of an idol. More importantly, other political parties that had emerged from among, or been embraced by, the Yorùbá were largely replicas of the A.G. It would seem that the metamorphosis of Egbé Ọmọ Odùduwà into A.G. buttressed its use as a launch-pad for involvement or participation in politics.

Beginning from its emergence in 1945, the association did not incorporate all the Yorùbá elite of the period. Not only did the excluded elite find accommodation elsewhere, their exclusion cast serious doubt on the desire of the association to promote Yorùbá unity. For instance, following a disagreement within the Nigerian Youth Movement, the likes of H. O. Davies, Adéníran Ògúnsànyà and T. O. S. Benson and other leading figures of the Yorùbá elite, who did not belong to Egbé Ọmọ Odùduwà, found accommodation in the National Council for Nigerian Citizens (N.C.N.C.), whereas the association metamorphosed into the Action Group, A.G.<sup>13</sup> One further proof of the political motives of the association was a major split which characterised it in the 1960s. This split, occasioned by seemingly irreconcilable personal and ideological differences,

resulted in the emergence of Egbé Ọmọ Ọlọfin, championed by the likes of Sir Adétòkunbò Adémólá and Dr. Adékóyèjo Májẹkódùnmi. Interestingly, Ọlọfin is another name for Odùduwà. The emergence of Egbé Ọmọ Ọlọfin further polarised the elite class and by extension the Yorùbá nation.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the perception of the N.C.N.C. as the party of the Igbo people, founded as it was and led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, caused the influence of the Yorùbá elite in the party to wane in Western Nigerian politics.

The scenario painted above did not change radically with the re-appearance of Afẹnifẹre in 1993. Afẹnifẹre, obviously a catch phrase for the core loyalist of Chief Ọbáfẹmi Awólówò and the A.G. in Nigeria's First Republic, was reorganised basically to protest the annulment of the June 12 1993 presidential election, won by M. K. O. Abíólá, a Yorùbá man, adjudged the free-est and fairest in the history of Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> Remarkably the Afẹnifẹre that emerged in 1993 was significantly different from the group that existed in the 1960s. Not only were strange bedfellows brought together, some of the old members were alienated. Essentially, the major criteria for membership were being a Yorùbá, as well as professing rejection of the annulment of the 1993 presidential election. Afẹnifẹre thus constituted itself into an opposition group against the Abacha administration. Like Egbé Ọmọ Odùduwà, Afẹnifẹre is not an all-embracing group having excluded politicians of Yorùbá descent considered as renegades. The renegades are specifically the politicians that served as ministers under General Sani Abacha and generally those who have been in opposition to Awólówò since the First Republic.<sup>16</sup> Besides it is seen as not being distinct from a political party, the Alliance for Democracy (A.D.),<sup>17</sup> one of the political parties formed to contest the 1999 general elections, but comprised mostly of Yorùbá elite. Not surprisingly, another association, the Yorùbá

Council of Elders (Y.C.E.), otherwise known as *Ìgbìmò Àgbà Yorùbá*, emerged in 2000. Its objectives include the achievement of unity of the Yorùbá race and securing greater participation of the Yorùbá in the affairs of the country.<sup>18</sup> While it could not be disputed that the Y.C.E. sincerely desire to achieve Yorùbá unity, it is also plausible to argue that the need for the excluded elite to find accommodation elsewhere could have influenced its emergence.

It would seem that one major impetus in the emergence of Y.C.E. was the objectionable manner in which the Alliance for Democracy's presidential primaries were held in January 1999.<sup>19</sup> As observed by *Ọnànúgà, Bólá Ìgè*, one of the core loyalists of Chief *Awólówò*, who lost in the primaries, felt betrayed by his colleagues in *Afènífèrè*, who transferred their support to Chief *Olú Fálàè*.<sup>20</sup> Although he did not quit *Afènífèrè*, his alienation perhaps made him inspire the emergence of Y.C.E. to challenge *Afènífèrè*'s hegemonic claims on Yorùbáland. Interestingly, *Bola Ige* belongs to the *Ìjèṣà* sub-group of the Yorùbá whereas *Olú Fálàè* is of the *Àkúrè* extraction. Incidentally the *Àkúrè/Òwò* group dominated the decision-making organ of the A.D. at this particular time.

The *Odùduwà* factor also played a prominent role in the emergence of other professed pan-Yorùbá groups. They include *Oòduà Development Council*, *Odùduwà Assembly*, *Pan-Yorùbá Congress*, *Yorùbá Parapò* and *Yorùbá Leaders Forum*.

The emergence of the *Oòduà People's Congress (O.P.C.)* in 1994 perhaps marked the climax of the relevance of the *Odùduwà* factor in the history of Yorùbáland. Formed in 1994, its major objectives include agitation for the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference (S.N.C.) as a vehicle for the restructuring of Nigeria into a true federal state, achievement of regional autonomy and self-determination of all

nationalities, as well as achievement of the equal rights of all nationalities to national leadership. More importantly, it seeks to achieve, promote and protect the interests of the Yorùbá in diaspora.<sup>21</sup> The clamour for the restructuring of Nigeria would probably have been influenced by the bitter experience the Yorùbá had with the annulment of the June 1993 presidential election, allegedly won by M. K. O. Abíólá, a Yorùbá man from Ògùn state, as well as the perceived domination of governance by the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria. As with Afẹ̀nifẹ̀re, the annulment of the 1993 presidential election was a major factor in its emergence.<sup>22</sup> Characteristic of other pan-Yorùbá groups that came before it, the O.P.C. eventually became polarised, with a faction led by Gàní Adams, breaking away from the main group led by Dr. Frederick Fáséhùn in 1999. As usual, a combination of personal and ideological reasons was responsible for the factionalisation.<sup>23</sup>

### **Odds against Yorùbá Unity**

Despite the efforts particularly by the elite to promote unity in Yorùbáland, it would seem from the preceding discussion that unity has been elusive. The inability of the elite to unite and carry the masses of the Yorùbá people along has worked against the attainment of Yorùbá unity. One major factor for this development could be the motive behind the formation of associations seeking to promote Yorùbá unity and solidarity. It would seem that the elite used the associations as platforms, either to secure political relevance and space, or even as a bargaining tool in the competitive ethnic politics characteristic of the Nigerian state. One good proof of this position was the exclusion of some people from the associations under one guise or the other, as well as the factionalisation of the different groups. If really the different groups seek to promote Yorùbá interest and unity, as they profess, they should have incorporated all Yorùbá indigenes irrespective of



political or ideological leaning. Perhaps the need for the formation of splinter groups would not have arisen.

Beyond the failure of the elite to promote unity in Yorùbáland, it would seem that the different Yorùbá groups deeply suspect one another. Tracing the origin of these suspicions could be difficult, but it is plausible to argue that the Yorùbá civil wars of the nineteenth century as well as the colonial government's management of the relationships among different groups could have accounted for it. For instance, the distortions of the traditional political arrangement, the elevation of one community above another, as well as the arbitrary location of colonial administrative bases contrary to the traditional importance of communities are some of the problems created by the colonial government.<sup>24</sup>

The mutual suspicion among the various Yorùbá sub-groups has resulted in the disdain with which they treat each other, as well as the derogatory terms with which they describe one another. It is therefore not uncommon for the Ègbá to denigrate Ìjẹ̀bù, or for the Ifẹ̀ and Ìjẹ̀sà to cast aspersions on the Òyó. This is manifest clearly in the terms and languages used by the different Yorùbá sub-groups to describe one another. The Òyó, for instance, are fond of saying that if one sees a snake and an Ìjẹ̀bù man at the same time, it is better to kill the Ìjẹ̀bù man first because he could pose a greater danger than the snake. Similarly the Ifẹ̀ and Ìjẹ̀sà are fond of saying that when an Òyó man prostrates himself on his belly, his mind or his real self actually squats. This portrays the Òyó as deceptive and slippery people. Also the Ońdó and Ìkálẹ̀ are fond of referring to other Yorùbá subgroups derogatorily as Kọ̀lọ̀lọ̀, which literally means “people that do not speak well,” but connotatively “people that are ignorant.” In addition the Òyó in Mọ̀dákẹ̀kẹ̀ see Ifẹ̀

indigenes as a bunch of lazy and ne'er-do-well people who spend all their time drinking palm wine. There are many other examples. Apart from explaining the cautious relationships among the Yorùbá, this problem fundamentally affects the Yorùbá membership of associations or groups. The case of Afẹ̀nifẹ̀re is a pertinent example in which the Ìjẹ̀bù and the Àkùré/Òwò axes that supposedly are dominant determine the fate of other Yorùbá in the association.<sup>25</sup> This and similar developments have impacted negatively on the cause of Yorùbá unity.

Related to the above development is the antagonistic manner in which some Yorùbá groups relate. A number of factors account for these antagonisms. It could be a factor of their past relationship, as is the case between Ifẹ̀ and Òyó settlers in Modakeke,<sup>26</sup> a community that emerged as a result of the demographic changes accompanying the Yorùbá wars of the nineteenth century. The Ifẹ̀ kingdom, for instance, was sacked twice in the nineteenth century by the combined forces of Ìbàdàn and Mọ̀dákẹ̀kẹ̀.<sup>27</sup> It could also be a product of struggle over land and chieftaincy matters, as seen in Ifọ̀n-Ìlobú relations.<sup>28</sup> Ifọ̀n and Ìlobú are two closely located Yorùbá communities in the Òṣun Division which have been at loggerheads for centuries, over which of the two settled first in the region and which is the superior. Sometimes the contradictions created by the British colonialists, in combination with other factors, could be responsible, as is the case between Ògbómòṣò and Orílẹ̀ Igbón.<sup>29</sup> Orílẹ̀ Igbón is a primordial settlement which according to tradition was populated by people with a martial spirit. The destruction of the settlement, coupled with the population movement witnessed in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland, led to the growth of Ògbómòṣò which eventually eclipsed Orílẹ̀ Igbón in importance. The elevation of the Ṣẹ̀ún of Ògbómòṣò over the

Olúgbón of Orílé-Igbón by the colonial government and subsequent governments has been a continual source of friction between the two traditional rulers and by extension their subjects.

As might be expected, antagonisms among the Yorùbá have produced negative results of diverse kinds. It has generated court cases in some instances. This was the case between Ifón and Ìlobú from 1924 until very recently. It has also provoked heated debates in newspapers and magazines. This was the experience of the Ògbómòṣó and Orílé-Igbón communities. In some extreme cases, it has degenerated into open conflict characterised by violence and the destruction of lives and property as witnessed in the Ifẹ-Mọdákéké affairs in 1981, 1983, and from 1997 to 2000.

Ironically, the traditional elite, who should know better, are part of this rot. Thus, rather than seeking ways and means of addressing the problem and promoting healthy relationships among the Yorùbá, they are mostly involved in the struggle for seniority and recognition. The prolonged face-off between the Qòni of Ifẹ, on one hand, and the Aláàfin of Òyó, Qwá-Obòkun of Ìjẹṣàland and Ṣòun of Ògbómòṣó, on the other, is pertinent in this regard.<sup>30</sup> The reason for the face-off was a dispute over whether the chairmanship of the Òyó state council of Obas and chiefs should be rotated or made permanent. But for the creation of Òṣun state out of the old Òyó state in 1991, which placed the contending parties in different states, the problem could have continued. Even then, some of its vestiges can still be seen.<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly but ironically, different Yorùbá groups outside Yorùbáland have tended to relate very well. This feeling of brotherhood could have been promoted by the need to have one's kinsmen to relate with, particularly in a foreign land. It could also be

due to the fact that the masses, having obviously moved away from the elite manipulation in their home bases, now have free minds to relate with others, paying no heed to their sub-groups.

The pre-occupation of the elite, both traditional and modern, with the desire for political relevance, position, recognition and influence has impacted negatively on the cause of Yorùbá unity. In the absence of any effective leadership untainted by partisan political affiliation, the masses of the people have been left to drift and wander like sheep without a shepherd. Consequently, it has become very difficult to address in concrete terms and resolve satisfactorily the myriads of problems affecting Yorùbáland, the most important being disunity. For instance, the renewed Ifẹ-Mọdákéké communal clashes have been going on since 1981. Although there is relative peace at present, it is clear that the important issues that led to the crisis, or which the crisis generated, have not been satisfactorily resolved. Neither the Afẹnifẹre nor Y.C.E. has done anything to address the problem. Similarly and until recently, chieftaincy problems lingered in Ọwò, an eastern Yorùbá town, as well as Àkúrẹ and other places in Yorùbáland to date. Yet the organisations that paraded themselves as the promoters of Yorùbá unity did not do and are not doing anything about it.

Although there may not be absolute unity among other major ethnic groups in Nigeria, it is clear that, unlike the Yorùbá, they have umbrella associations which are not affiliated to political parties and which seek to protect their interests.<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly these associations command relatively the respect of the masses of these groups. The Arewa Consultative Forum among the Hausa-Fulani and Ohaneze Ndigbo among the Igbo are examples of such associations.

One important consequence of disunity in Yorùbáland has been the inability of the Yorùbá to present a common front on national issues, as groups claiming to be speaking for the Yorùbá sing discordant tunes. The issue of presenting a common agenda at the National Political Reforms Conference held in 2005 is a case in point. Even when it appears as if a consensus is to be reached, some elite—because of their privileged position and what they perceive as a threat to their continued political relevance—still criticise and condemn the common position taken by the majority.

### **Conclusion**

The Odùduwà factor has been variously exploited by the elite purportedly to promote unity and solidarity in Yorùbáland. However, beyond the rhetoric and the seemingly patriotic instinct on the part of the elite, it is clear that the Odùduwà factor has mostly been exploited to promote the selfish political interests of the elite. This perhaps explains the constant splitting of the associations claiming to promote Yorùbá unity.

The problem of disunity in Yorùbáland could, however, be said to predate the twentieth century, as different groups deeply suspected one another and engaged in mutual antagonism characterised by bickering and even open confrontations in some extreme cases. Developments that took place in Yorùbáland before and during the twentieth century could have brought about this situation. However, it would seem that rather than addressing these problems, the elite have exploited them for personal and selfish gains. This perhaps explains why the problem lingers.

In seeking to promote unity in Yorùbáland, there is a need for the elite to look more inward. This inward-looking process will involve self-searching on the part of the elite with the intent of purging themselves of selfish attitudes and behaviour. Then it will

be possible for them to place the attainment of Yorùbá corporate goals over and above all other considerations. Besides, there is a need for the masses of the people to live above the fears and stereotypes which have characterised relationships among them in the past. More importantly, the masses should refuse any overt or covert manipulation by the elite. Until this is achieved, the idea of Yorùbá unity may remain a mirage.

### Notes

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3. Adédiran, 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. See for instance Johnson, *The History*; J. A. Adémákinwá, *Ifẹ̀, Cradle of the Yorùbás* 2 parts (Lagos: privately printed, 1958); M. A. Fábùnmi, *An Anthology of Historical Notes in Ifẹ̀ City* (Lagos: John West Publications, 1985), 10-25; Adédiran, 77-95.
6. Adédiran, 4-5.
7. The incumbent Awùjalẹ̀ of Ìjẹ̀bùland, Oba Síkírù Adétònà, has consistently maintained this position. However, there does not seem to be any historical evidence to back up this claim. See for instance O. O. Olubomehin, ed., *The Ìjẹ̀bù of Western Nigeria: A Historical and Socio-cultural Study* (Ìbàdàn: College Press and Publishers Limited, 2001).
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20. Bayò Qnànúgà, “The Unravelling of Afẹ̀nifẹ̀re” 1-2  
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22. R. T. Akínyẹ̀lé, “Ethnic Militancy and National Stability in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Oòduà People’s Congress” (*African Affairs* 100, 2001), 623-640; Túndé Babáwálé, “The State, Ethnic Militias and the Challenges of Democratic Governance in Post-Military Nigeria” in Túndé Babáwálé, ed., 201-211.
23. Sessay, *et al.*, 36.
24. J. F. Adé Àjàyí, “19<sup>th</sup> Century Wars and Yorùbá Ethnicity” in Akínjógbìn, *War and Peace*, 9-18.
25. Aiyékòótó, “The Trouble....”; Ọ̀shúnkẹ̀yẹ, “Old Man Old Hate”
26. R. A. Qláníyan, “The Mọ̀dákékẹ̀ Question in Ifẹ̀ Politics and Diplomacy” in Akínjógbìn ed., *The Cradle*, 266-282.
27. Akínjógbìn, 44-48.
28. Abimbólá Adésojí, *Migrations, Settlements and Inter-Community Relations in Írẹ̀pòdùn Communities* (now in Ọ̀sun State) 1840-1965 (M.Phil. Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, 2003).
29. For instance the Olúgbón of Orílẹ̀-Ìgbón is still laying claim to more princely status than the Sòùn of Ọ̀gbómọ̀şó see *The Punch*, Lagos, 5 December 2003.
30. There was a prolonged court case involving the traditional rulers on the issue of rotation *vis-à-vis* permanent chairmanship of the old Ọ̀yọ̀ state Council of Obas and Chiefs.
31. For instance, the Qwá-Obòkun of Íjẹ̀şàland still sees his status as being equal to that of Qòni of Ifẹ̀.
32. Aiyékòótó, “The Trouble....”