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## Book Review

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Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola, *The Yoruba: From Prehistory to the Present*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, US\$105.00 (hardback), US\$41.99 (paperback/e-book). ISBN 978 1 10706 460 7 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 10768 394 5 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 10758 765 6 (e-book).

Akinwumi Ogundiran, *The Yoruba: A New History*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020, US\$100 (hardback), US\$40 (paperback), US\$39.99 (e-book). ISBN 978 0 25305 148 6 (hardback), 978 0 25305 149 3 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 25305 152 3 (e-book).

*The Yoruba: from Prehistory to the Present* by Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola (2019) and *The Yoruba: A New History* (2020) by Akinwunmi Ogundiran are two monumental contributions to the history of the Yoruba written in the twenty-first century. In addition to earlier works on the Yoruba by scholars such as Samuel Johnson (1921) and Akin Akinjogbin (2002), amongst others, these two books, published a year apart, both provide unique perspectives on the Yoruba in the *long durée* drawing on continued archaeological work done in the area. Nevertheless, these are two very different books. Aribidesi and Falola's work explores the development of Yoruba as a cultural complex within a cultural-historical framework. Ogundiran's work examines the different processes that shape Yoruba lifeways and communal practices up to the 1840s with relevance to the present. Here, the focus is on the development of lived experiences of the group, analysed with a more post-processual theoretical outlook.

### *The Yoruba: From Prehistory to the Present* by Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola

This book begins with an introduction to Yoruba society and its geographical location in Chapter 1. It lays the foundation for the relevance of Ile Ife in Yoruba history based on the evidence of early villages, material cultures, and sociopolitical systems that existed prior 800 AD. While this chapter discusses the mythical origins of Ile Ife, its most central thesis is the role of archaeological and linguistic evidence in establishing a period of Yoruba history before Oduduwa. However, it argues that much is still to be known about this period. This introductory chapter

sets the pace for the entire book to focus on dynamism and change among the Yoruba at different periods. After Chapter 1, the rest of the book is divided into six parts with 19 chapters.

Part 1 consists of three chapters (2–4) that cover the Stone Age, Iron Age, and Classical periods among the Yoruba until about 1600 AD. It examines the time from the earliest beginnings of the Yoruba, highlighting the sparse evidence for occupation at Yoruba habitation sites of the Early and Middle Stone Age periods. However, there was an increase in archaeological evidence for occupation in the Late Stone Age period. Chapter 2 explores the nature of the evidence from sites related to the prehistorical and proto-historical periods among the Yoruba. *Aba* formed part of the earliest settlement types, serving as habitation space and farming areas. Habitation in the *Aba* was shaped by biological descent. The *Aba* subsequently coalesced to form villages as populations increased through time. However, the *Aba* remained a valuable unit of social organization in Yoruba settlement configurations. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the growth of Yoruba complex societies, with explication of the relevance of Ile Ife, Oyo, other Yoruba states (including Owu, Ijesa, Egba, and Ijebu), and small-scale polities that existed on the Northern frontier until 1600 AD. A major contribution of this book is the significant integration of the northern Yoruba polities into the historical analysis of the Yoruba, espousing their connections and relevance in Yoruba history. This integration is particularly achieved through the connections of material items (including potsherd pavements, ceramics, and sculptures) recovered from archaeological investigations in northern Yoruba polities with those from Ile Ife and Oyo.

Part 2 explores the entry of the Yoruba into the Atlantic world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Mainly, this section emphasizes the role of Oyo and coastal communities in the entanglements of the Yoruba in the Atlantic economy. Chapter 5 explores the age of empire building and militarist expansion of Oyo and its subjugation of other polities. It highlights the political strategies employed by Oyo to control other Yoruba polities, resulting in the creation of frontier settlements, including Okun and the Egbado region. Oyo's efforts at political dominance and territorial expansion occurred over the reign of several Alaafin, including Obalokun and Ajagbo, continuing until around 1780. Oyo's aspirations to control critical trade routes in the emergent trans-Atlantic trade networks also motivated this expansion strategy. Chapter 6 takes a deep dive into the eighteenth-century period in Yoruba history. Among the results of the wars discussed in Chapter 5 was an emergent system of social stratification and servitude that laid the foundation for Oyo's relevance in the Trans-Atlantic trade. Prior to the Atlantic period, captives of war primarily served domestic functions within households. However, the Trans-Atlantic trade transformed the dynamics of human servitude, resulting in an increase in the number of enslaved individuals for economic purposes. The socio-political dynamics and regional interactions of the Yoruba during this period of increased slavery in the hinterlands, and expanded hinterland-coast interactions, were dominated by the Oyo empire.

Part 3 explores the nineteenth-century wars and transformations in Yorubaland. Covering chapters seven through ten, this section evaluates the different internecine wars among the Yoruba cultural groups and the attendant effects on the rise and fall of the empires formed in the eighteenth century. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 examine the consequences of the war on the Yoruba internally. Following this trajectory, Aribidesi and Falola explore themes of population dislocation, collapse, increased slave raiding, trading, European intervention, the subjugation of the Yoruba under European powers, and the creation of a diasporic identity for the Yoruba people. Of import is the specificity of the discussions of the major internecine wars of the 19th century, including the Owu wars, Ibadan war, the Ijaye war, and the Ekitiparapo/Kiriji war. The authors also highlight some of the adaptation strategies by Yoruba communities during this period of intense instability. Several Yoruba populations migrated to hilltop settlements; many joined forces to strengthen their military, and built earthen ramparts and walls to keep the enemies out – sometimes unsuccessfully. A section of Chapter 9 expounds on the emergence

of the Yoruba diaspora, and the various nomenclatures assigned to the enslaved Yoruba people in different parts of the world, including Brazil, Cuba, and Saint-Dominique (Haiti). This section closes with Chapter 10, which reviews the impacts of non-Yoruba actors as new agents of transformation in the nineteenth century. The external factors, such as Islam, Christianity, and Western education, led to the growth of group consciousness and ethnogenesis among the Yoruba. The trans-Atlantic trade facilitated the spread of Yoruba ideology and lifeways beyond the African continent, resulting in Yoruba contributions to transformation in the New World and the globalization of Yoruba. The period during the post-slave trade era and nascent colonialism also redefined the experiences of the Yoruba.

Part 4 of the book explores the ubiquity of Yoruba cultural practices over time. Merging the period since the existence of the Yoruba, Chapter 11 focuses on the pre-Atlantic economy of the Yoruba, describing subsistence practices such as agriculture, hunting and fishing, craft industries, and the impacts of Yoruba economic specializations. Chapter 12 provides a nexus of religion and world view of the Yoruba with its pantheons, spirit personalities, ancestors, and implications of Yoruba epistemic knowledge for healing and evocation. Chapter 13 centers on the creativity of the Yoruba through time. These include detailed descriptions of Yoruba symbolism through arts, sculpture, architectural forms, body adornments, and music, and how they have changed through time.

Part 5, divided into Chapters 14 and 15, reviews the Yoruba identity in the colonial period and the responses to new political aggregations created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also centers the inception of nationalist movements and political party formations and the role of women in these processes. This analysis is followed by the integration of discourse on infrastructural development among the Yoruba during the colonial era and resistance to colonial policies characteristic of the twentieth century. Post-colonialism is the focus of the book's final part that straddles Chapters 16 through 20. This section examines the post-independence era and the place of the Yoruba in political decisions in Nigeria, the republican and military regimes, civil war in Nigeria, and electoral processes until the present time. The book is a compendium of events that shaped the Yoruba through time. It explores the changes witnessed by the Yoruba group as a function of epochal events occurring internally and externally to the social organization of the Yoruba.

The book thus presents in chronological order the state of knowledge and the growth of the Yoruba over their long history. It meshes linguistic evidence, oral traditions,

myths, and archaeological data to discuss the history of the Yoruba beyond the Oyo and Ife centric focus that earlier accounts adopted. For those seeking to understand Yoruba history and culture, this book provides key insights in an historical narrative that spans 2000 years.

***The Yoruba: A New History* by Akinwunmi Ogundiran**

*The Yoruba: A New History* is divided into five sections, with ten chapters covering political, economic, social, and religious themes across the same 2000-year period of Yoruba history. The first section (archaic period) introduces the book, defining the Yoruba as a community of practice rather than a language community. This sets the stage for reimagining the lived experiences of the Yoruba as a fluid process continually coalescing and shifting boundaries through time. As against earlier cultural-historical approaches focused on periodization, Ogundiran investigates the agency of the people who created the traditions of what he refers to as the Yoruba community of practice. The first section contains only Chapter 1, and espouses continuity and change in the Yoruba landscape as an overlap of experiences spanning the first millennium BC to the nineteenth century. Through this, the chapter explores the process of becoming the Yoruba, weaving environmental data, archaeological research, and Yoruba oral histories to trace the agency of the Yoruba in making their histories.

The second section includes Chapters 2 and 3. It surveys the birth of this Yoruba community of practice between ca. 300 BC to AD 1420. Combining regional histories, Chapter 2 explores the archaeological traces of proto-Yoruboid groups in the Niger-Benue confluence and the ecological conditions that allowed their migration southwards. Following this, the chapter narrates the lived experiences of the first Yoruba man (Oni Itaakpa) in the archaeological record through his morphology, the tools he used, and the environmental conditions within which he existed. It introduces the emergence of *Ile* (the House system) as the primary unit of social organization that emerged from the archaic period to the formative periods. *Ile* features prominently throughout the book as the foundational building block of the Yoruba community of practice. Chapter 3 examines the development of this house system in Ile Ife beyond the *Ile* to the *Ilu*. The *Ilu*, an expanded derivative of *Ile* emerged as the beginning of increased sociopolitical organization in the Yoruba community of practice. The *Ilu*, a conglomerate of *Iles*, incubated in the Ekiti-Igbomina axis, facilitated the development of a knowledge capital that later flourished

in Ile-Ife. This highlights the emergence of Ile Ife as the renowned cradle of the Yoruba community. The next chapter (Chapter 3) expands on this idea, focusing on the classical period in Ife. It examines human capital (diplomacy), skills (bead production), infrastructure (architecture), and technology (terracotta and bronze) in Ife as a knowledge base that revolutionized the empire to referential status among the Yoruba and other far-flung polities. These regional and transregional connections translated Ife's worldview and historical experiences to other regions. In this regard, Ife became the incipient empire of the Yoruba community of practice through its unprecedented wealth from bead manufacture and its associated trade networks, standardized divine kingship system, and the array of transcendental intellectuals producing the knowledge of Ifa. Integrating the material and idealistic essence of Ife, this chapter elucidates the source of Ife's hegemony in Yoruba history.

Part 3 reviews the conditions that birthed the atrophy, regeneration, and restoration of Yoruba empires between ca. 1400–1650. Here, Chapter 4 examines the political, economic, and security upheavals that resulted in the decline of the Yoruba community of practice and the consequences to displacements of people. Against earlier traditions ascribing cause and effect to the collapse of dynasties amongst the Yoruba, Ogundiran argues that the period of atrophy correlates with multitiered events ranging from aggressive attacks, the rise of epidemics, episodes of famine, political crises, economic perturbations as well as multiyear drought episodes. Chapter 5 surveys the regeneration period following the decline of Yoruba dynasties for over 200 years. It centers on the new communities of practice formed after the collapse as a process of change and continuity. Using an exploration of panegyrics and myth stories, this chapter imagines the lived experiences of warrior kings, the diplomacy of intellectual and political actors to create a new Yoruba world following the collapse of early empires. It deconstructs many collective Yoruba myths, espousing nuances through which history is created and legitimized. This analysis by Ogundiran does not minimize the quality/veracity of Yoruba histories and mythologies. It instead, strengthens them by exposing the processes through which the "truths" come to be.

Part 4 has four chapters surveying the period of Atlantic entanglements. Chapter 6 examines the merchant capital revolution and the strategies employed by Oyo to create political and economic networks with coastal cities between 1630–1840. It also discusses the impacts of the merchant capital revolution (cowrie, tobacco) on the Yoruba domestic economy and regional exchange systems in west Africa. Ogundiran highlights how and why the Oyo empire

rose to fame and became significant in the historiography of the Yoruba people, particularly in the period of the transatlantic trade. Oyo's rise to fame, economic and political dominance is credited to progress garnered through the course of sociopolitical, ecological and economic crises from the Sudan and Sahel, Oyo's significant position in the trade networks of West Africa, and its connections with the Europeans of the Trans-Atlantic trade. Chapter 7 reviews the models developed by the Yoruba community of practice for translating and domesticating their Atlantic experience, how the Yoruba appropriated Atlantic commodities to make new meanings of local experiences, and how they created an "object-centered" material world in the sixteenth through the late eighteenth centuries. Chapter 8 meshes materiality and myths to discuss the inception of a new system of labor organization developed through the convergence of merchant capital with local lived experiences and the influences of these on gender and class systems in the Yoruba community of practice. Chapter 9 explores the breakdown of social order in the Yoruba community of practice following the excessive reliance on Atlantic exchange goods, the fall of the Oyo empire, and the instability that followed these experiences. It further investigates the impacts of these crises on successive periods, such as the formation of new cities among the Yoruba (e.g., Ibadan in the 1840s) and diasporic identities represented through Samuel Ajayi Crowther, amongst others. In this section, Ogundiran explores the agency of these historical actors in making the Yoruba as we now know them to be. Chapter 10 (part 5) concludes the book by arguing that the history of the Yoruba constitutes episodes of continuity and change spanning over 2000 years.

The book abandons the kingdom-centric approach adopted by earlier scholars to analyze Yoruba historiography. In lieu of this, Ogundiran argues for a transregional approach that subsumes the lived experiences of the Yoruba within regional and interregional conditions. Therefore, *The Yoruba: A New History* is a web of environmental, linguistic, archaeological, mythological, and epistemic traditions that span many centuries exploring the intricacies of the deep-time histories of the Yoruba world (a process of continuity and change). In concluding, Ogundiran writes, "One of my goals in this study is to disaggregate the multiple layers of this past and the ways in which they inform the present" (p. 403), and this is where the value of the book lies. Through the adoption of a trans-disciplinary theoretical and methodological framework, the book unearths layers of the dynamism of existence of the Yoruba community of practice, revealing long generations of change in Yoruba history across 2 millennia in Yoruba history. The incipient

political organization in many parts of Yoruba community of practice as discussed by Ogundiran, also advances global knowledge of the diversity of political strategies in the region. As part of the aims of the book, Ogundiran carefully exposes the shifts in political, economic, and social life ways through time, moving away from static views of Yoruba people, particularly as a group defined by language and common descent.

### Concluding Thoughts

The two books in this review both provide a deep historical framework for exploring the Yoruba. Synthesizing diverse perspectives from oral traditions, myth stories, archaeological evidence and the Orisa Corpus, this historiography is an enormous addition to the prehistory of the Yoruba. Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola's work focuses on highly organized social polities, advancing the history of Yoruba by integrating Northern Yoruba frontiers in the discourse. Ogundiran's focus on the lived experiences of the Yoruba highlights the roles of everyday people in the many political, economic, and sociocultural shifts that occurred in the long history of the Yoruba.

From Ogundiran's evaluation of the origin of the word "Yoruba" (p. 172), to Usman and Falola's discussion on Post-colonial Yoruba (Chapter 16), both books highlight the diversity among the Yoruba, and move past seeing the Yoruba as a monolithic group. The historiographies documented in these books reveal the dynamic processes of continuity and change that led to the organization of the Yoruba communities both in Nigeria and in diaspora, advancing Ogundiran's aim of moving past a view of Yoruba history as a time-compressed event. The interplay of the internecine wars and the socioeconomic coagulations that followed the war are results of the strategies of survival and dominance that straddles the over 2000 years of the existence of the Yoruba. The trans-Atlantic slave trade period is also crucial to understanding the dispersal and global spread of Yoruba people and their lifeways.

The two books in this review center materiality and human agency in the formation, sustenance, and evolution of the Yoruba through time. This is particularly evident in Ogundiran's assignment of personhood to the human remains recovered in the archaeological records of the Itaakpa rock shelter, the discussion on the agency of cowries, glass beads, facial marks, and tobacco in negotiating power and sociopolitical and economic spaces in the historiography covered in his book. Usman and Falola also highlight the use of materiality in negotiating

intergroup relationships, and in the maintenance of social cohesion through the integration of objects and features, including glass beads, potsherd pavements and sculptures in their account of Yoruba history. The two books question the canonical beliefs in Yoruba historiography and urge a reimagination of Yoruba history as we know it.

Of import is also the allusion to the evolution of the scale of production and consumption in the different Yoruba communities discussed in the two books. The changes in production and distribution of craft objects accompanied the varying political and socioeconomic strategies adopted at different times and stages in the history of the Yorubas. In this regard, integrating a discussion about the political economy and agency of craft producers in navigating the sociopolitical and economic shifts that occurred throughout Yoruba historiography would be a significant contribution to the histories covered in both books.

## References

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