



THE YORUBA RACE AND NIGERIAN POLITICS.

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ABSTRACT

The Yoruba race occupies an undisputable large expanse of the Nigerian State and has a population that spreads across other continent of the world. This qualifies her as one of the nations that spread beyond a definable territory. This advantage therefore presents the Yoruba race as one that should have the capability and placement to determine the direction of events in the present day Nigerian politics. Given this position, it becomes a problematic situation to note that amidst its strategic advantage that is evident in its population and geographic spread, it has failed to fully take its place in national and global politics. Consequent upon the forgoing, this paper critically examines the historical foundation of Yoruba nation and its involvement in Nigerian politics. Data for this study will be obtained from secondary source. The study discovered that the Yoruba nation is undergoing a form of strategic marginalization in Nigerian politics and by implication this has limited its chances of actualizing its full potential even when it held leadership position in Nigeria, her power-play was determined by forces outside of the political equation. It therefore recommends that for Nigeria to actualize its full potentials of comprehensive national development, it is important that the intellectual, economic, social and religious advantage possessed by the Yoruba nation be given considerable recognition and primacy of place by the nation handlers, which should be reciprocated in other places where the Yoruba race is found.

Keywords: *Geographical Spread; Global Politics; Marginalization, Yoruba; Nigerian Politics*

Introduction

The contemporary Nigerian political history cannot be written without a good space allotted to the Yoruba race. The pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigerian state attest to the giant strides undertaken by some notable

nationalists whose actions in politics and the economic formations mid-wifed the emergence of the independence of the country in 1960.

Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, the Yoruba ethnic group has played significant roles in the various administrations that governed the country. Her roles in the consummation of the country's democratic process is however subject of various opinions based on the position the representatives from this influential and a foremost ethnic group has hitherto played in making the various democratic dispensations in Nigeria a success or otherwise. The Yoruba race in Nigeria has gone through thick and thin in the country's political landscape especially since the emergence of the Nigeria in the pre-colonial, through the colonial and to the post-colonial eras. Every national political space requires the active participation of all ethnic groups which constitute a major condition for political participation and party spread. The nature of democracy across the world requires the gross integration of opinions across all sections of the ethnic groups that make-up the country.

Given the obvious hallmark of democracy which is hinged on the comprehensive simple yes of a majority for the enthronement of any government, it becomes instructive to state that, the existence of any administration should cut across a wide spectrum of the country and by extension involve all ethnic groups in its establishment. This informs the enviable place the Yoruba nation in Nigerian politics which has become a subject of varying opinions especially between occupying its rightful place and discharging its responsibility based on the positions occupied in the nation's political and power equation.

Consequent upon the above, Bamitale Omole¹ avers that, "in the contemporary international system, most nations strive to adopt democracy as their official form of government. The reason for this is not far-fetched. It has become crystal-clear that democracy is not only the best form of government but also the form of government adopted by most of the developed/advanced countries of the First World. In other words, there appears to be a synergy between democracy and development in the contemporary global system. To this end, majority of the Third World countries of Africa and Asia are currently striving to democratize their political systems and institutions. However, most African countries, including Nigeria, have not been able to achieve sustainable democracy and development because of certain obvious reasons".

Therefore, this study critically explores the place of the Yoruba as a nation that has contributed in no small measure to the political, economic, social and religious emancipation of every society they are found and most fundamentally in the affairs of the Nigeria while it has not received its expected portion in the country's political space.

Statement of the Problem

Political activities are intrinsically dependent on interactions between various constituent units for their success or otherwise. The configuration of every political system requires the inputs of ethnic groups for the establishment of a viable political process that will include all sections of the country. Therefore, to achieve a good political process that will engender comprehensive and all inclusive society preference must be given to those ethnic groups that ensured the formation of the political order especially the majority which is a determinant of democracy as any action on the contrary portends grave danger of marginalization for such ethnic group and race and by implication undermine nation building and raise suspicion which are pointer to conflict and eventual disintegration of the whole polity.

Hence, there is need for a re-examination of the place of the Yoruba nation in Nigeria's political process and in other climes where the people are found reveals the reality of strategic marginalization in the political equation given her unquestionable population advantage and allegiance especially to the Nigerian project since.

In the finally analysis, the obvious question that deserves answers are: what is the place of the Yoruba race in world politics given her spread across nations of the world? What is the implication of strategic marginalization the Yoruba race is facing given her unquestionable commitment to the Nigerian call for oneness amidst agitations for successions amongst other ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian state? Though the Yoruba race is seen at the centre of Nigeria's political and power equation, why is her role confined to the place of secondness?

Yoruba Race in Perspective

The Yoruba live in a tropical region not too far south of the Sahara. Although now considered as a single "ethnic group" or people, in pre-colonial times the Yoruba did not form a political unit, but comprised many separate states in what is now south-western Nigeria and other states across Nigeria. "Yoruba" was an alternative name for the largest and most powerful of these

states, Oyo, in the north. The name was extended in the second half of the nineteenth century to the entire linguistic and cultural group claiming a common origin from Ile-Ife, the site of a remarkable myth of creation (Bascom 1969)².

Their pre-colonial town crafts, dating from the Middle Ages, were among the earliest developed in Africa. Yoruba towns are mentioned in written records of the sixteenth century (Gugler and Flanagan 1978)³. These towns were composed of enclosed compounds, with descent groups varying in size from 20 to 2,000 persons living together in each compound. The towns had semi-divine kings who were selected from royal lineages by governing bodies of chiefs and elders, who represented the different wards and constituencies of the towns.

Originally, most towns had broad, straight streets crossing at the centre, where a palace adjoined the most important market. The tendency of refugees from tribal wars and other immigrants to locate and build within the towns later led to more compact, less systematically planned, residential neighbourhoods⁴.

The Yoruba race occupies a large portion of the present Nigerian State and cuts across other countries of Africa, America, Cuba, Brazil and West Indies. The Yoruba inhabit Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, Lagos, parts of Kwara and Kogi States of Nigeria. They are also found in the south-eastern area of present-day Republic of Benin (formerly known as Dahomey) and some parts of Togo and Ghana (Johnson 1973⁵; Williams 1969⁶; Biobaku 1976⁷). Similarly, the trans-Atlantic slave trade resulted in the forcible exportation of a sizable number of Yoruba population to America, Cuba, Brazil and the West Indies” (Joseph, 1988; David and David; 1997; Pierre, 1976). It furtherance to the above, it was also noted that “as a result of the European invasion and partition of Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Yoruba in Nigeria were politically separated from their kith and kin in the Republics of Benin, Togo and Ghana.

According to Johnson (1973)

Yoruba country lies to the immediate West of the River Niger (below the confluence) and South of the Quorra the Western branch of the same River above the confluence Dahomey on the West, and the Bight of Benin to the South. It is roughly speaking between latitude 6° and 9° North and longitude 2° 30' and 6° 30' East. The country was

probably first known to Europe from the North, through the explorers of Northern and Central Africa for in old records the Hausa and Fulani names are used for the country and its capital thus we see West Africa Gazetteer "YARRIBA", West Africa, East Dahomey, area 70,000sq. miles, population two millions, capital KATUNGA. These are the Hausa terms for YORUBA and for Oyo.

The entire south of the country is a network of lagoons connecting the deltas of the great River Niger with that of the Volta, and into the lagoon which is belted with a more or less mangrove swamp, most of the rivers which flow through the country North to South pour their waters⁸.

It is seen from the above that the Yoruba nation has a coverage that extends across the length and breadth of major world societies which qualifies her as a major force in world and national events and thus accords her primacy of place especially in the unquestionable determination of any event around its dominate because the voice of the majority constitute a major force in determining power and resource allocation.

Furthermore, it was noted that, "... This part of the country of which Lagos in the Bight of Benin is the seaport, is generally known as the Yoruba country, extending from the Bight to within two or three days' journey to the Banks of the Niger. This country comprises many tribes governed by their own chiefs and having their own crowns. At one time they were all tributaries to one sovereign, the king of the Yoruba, including Benin on the East, and Dahomey on the West but are now independent"⁹.

According to Akinjogbin (1992)¹⁰ "The traditions of origin and migrations point to Ile-Ife as the epicentre of their civilization. Ile-Ife was their first city whence the children of Oduduwa, their eponymous ancestor, migrated to found towns which later became seats of many Yoruba kingdoms. Seven or sixteen of such towns were said to have originally been founded".

In terms of natural endowment, the Yoruba are well blessed with their location, suitable for all manners of agricultural endeavours and assorted gainful enterprises. This no doubt served the race well in times past in the area of trade and commerce that aided accelerated exposure to Western civilization. In the pre-colonial period, towns like Porto Novo, Badagry and Lagos were important ports for the Atlantic trade, and control of the trade

routes into the interior was a major issue in the politics of the Yoruba kingdoms.

Lagos, Nigeria's former administrative capital, and by all means still the nation's commercial nerve-centre, was bombarded by the British in 1851 and annexed to the British Crown in 1861. Till date, it remains by far the largest city in Nigeria, as well as its major port and industrial centre - a fact that has profoundly influenced the development of the Yoruba hinterland.

In his analysis of the spread of the Yoruba nation across the world, Bascom (1969) notes that, "the Yoruba had an index of urbanization of 39.3 which falls below that of Great Britain with 65.9, Germany with 46.1 and only slightly below the United States with 42.3, but it exceeds Canada with 34.3, France with 31.2, Greece with 25.2 and Poland with 7.4. the Yoruba are the most urban of all African peoples and their way of life is traditional, dating back well before the period of European penetration¹¹".

Yoruba Nation: A Strategic Positioning and Advantage

There is no gainsaying the obvious fact that the Yoruba race occupies a strategic place in all phases of the world and within the various set ups of the Nigeria. It has been stated that the Yoruba surpass a collective that should be called race but has earned the appellation of country given their population and spread across countries and continents of the world.

Furthermore, apart from demographic advantage, the Yoruba are also gifted in all spheres of human endeavours starting from many academics personalities who have earned their place on the good side of history. On the industrial front, the Yoruba are first amongst their equals as they have been found to be very industrious and have consistently served as the commercial-personnel of the Nigerian State. Also important is the fact that the Yoruba have contributed in no small measure to propagating the institutions of religion as their footprint is seen and noticed across religious divides (Traditional, Islam and Christianity).

South-western Nigeria is home to about 20-25 million Yoruba (figures projected from the Nigeria Fertility Survey 1984)¹², who inhabit an area that stretches about 120 miles along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, east from the Benin border, to about 200 miles inland into the savannah belt of West Africa. The Yoruba are the most urbanized and possibly the most industrialized ethnic group in sub-Saharan Africa. About 20 per cent of Nigerians and 10 per cent of West Africans are Yoruba.

Yorubaland has at least nine cities with populations of more than 100,000 each, and has 60-70 per cent rate of urbanization overall. Lagos, the home of our urban sample children, is the centre of a greater metropolitan area with a projected population in 1991 of 10 million (Federal Republic of Nigeria and UNICEF 1990). South-western Nigeria has the country's highest concentration of industries, with more than 50 per cent of the country's manufacturing output, predominantly in light industrial manufacturing products such as furniture, textiles, clothing, plastics, paper, leather goods, foodstuffs, confectionery, beverages, and tobacco products. The Yoruba had a complex pre-colonial system of urban residence, economic production, and trade (Bascom 1969)¹³.

In the sphere of commerce and industry, Oil and Gas, the Yoruba ranks amongst the best with personalities like Femi Otedola, Oba Otudeko, Mike Adenuga, **Abiodun Mustafa (President Yoruba Community in Pakistan)**, Henry Oloyede Fajemirokun (former president Nigeria Chamber of Commerce) , Adebayo Adedeji (which led to the formation of Economic Community of West African States) Madan Efunroye Tinubu.

In politics, the Yoruba had played significant roles in the emergence of the Nigerian state with the activities of political personalities like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Samuel Ladoke Akintola, Chief Abraham Adesanya, Micheal Afolabi, Chief Bola Ige, Chief Ernest Shonekan, Olusegun Obasanjo, M. K. O. Abiola, Gbenga Daniel, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Yemi Osibajo, Bisi Akande, e.t.c. The contributions of these personalities have in no small means affected Nigeria's democratic process.

In the academics, the Yoruba race has stood out amongst their equals with contributions from eminent academic personalities from like J.J. Oludotun Ransome-Kuti (Clergyman, educationist, father of modern education in Yoruba land, and perhaps, Nigeria. Principal of Abeokuta Boys' School, Nigeria Union of Teachers leader), Professor Sanya Onabamiro, Prof. Saburi Biobaku, Prof, Akinjogbin, Prof Teslim Elias, Prof. Oyetunji Aboyade, Prof. Wole Soyinka, Prof. Wande Abinbola, Prof. Toyin Falola, Prof, Akin Mabogunje and Prof. Babatunde Fafunwa, e.t.c.

In the music and entertainment industry, Yoruba sons and daughter that have made giant strides include, Ebenezer Fabiyi Obey, Adegeye Sunny Ade, Oyin Adejobi, Sunday Ishola Adeniyi, Moses Olaiya, Kola Ogunmola, Hubert Ogunde, Akinwunmi Ishola, e.t.c.

Also, the Yoruba has made contributions with eminent personalities like Chief Afe Babalola, Late Justices Kayode Eso, Chief Bola Ige, Chief Ganiyu Fawehinmi, Chief Rotimi Williams, Teslim Elias,

Yoruba Nation and Nigerian Politics

The emergence of the present Nigeria is largely attributed to the immeasurable contributions of the Yoruba race in collaboration with other ethnic groups starting from Nigeria's colonial through post-colonial and especially this democratic dispensation. The role of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, S. L. Akintola, M. K. O. Abiola, Olusegun Obasanjo, Abraham Adesanya and other numerous politicians of Yoruba descent. The contributions of these personalities and other individuals have in no small way ensured the establishment of a viable democratic order in the present Nigeria. These personalities played significant roles in the emergence of an independent Nigerian state and consequently the return to this present democratic dispensation.

The earliest Nigerian nationalists of Yoruba extraction were committed patriots who envisioned a new Nigerian commonwealth that would overcome the diversity of its composition. It was in this regard that Chief Obafemi Awolowo admonished as far back as 1947 not to rest on the assumption that Nigeria was yet a nation, for such assumption was dangerous and unhelpful. He rightly called it "a mere geographical expression" and proffered ways to move it towards real nationhood. Because his fellow nationalists from other areas preferred to flagellate him instead of taking his advice, Nigeria's march to nationhood was short-circuited and truncated by the opportunism of those who prefer the delusion that Nigeria is a settled matter. Is Nigeria more of a nation today than it was 66 years ago when Awolowo made that assertion? Even though the correct answer is NO, the Yoruba people can always be counted prominently in the vanguard of those advocating for a national conference to restructure the political architecture Nigeria so that a real nation can emerge from it.

Commenting on the role of Abraham Adesanya, Fawole (2012) states that "

The fact that he (Pa Abraham Adesanya) became the acknowledged Leader of the Yoruba was a testament to his commitment to the advancement of the Yoruba nation and cause. Even when others cynically abandoned the struggle for the enthronement of democracy, and scores were forced to flee abroad for safety, Pa Abraham Adesanya stayed behind in Nigeria, and led Nigerians in the pro-democracy struggle from the trenches, and at great

personal costs. He was deputy leader of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), the pro-democracy organization which became a thorn in the flesh of General Sani Abacha's dictatorship. For his temerity and activism, he was targeted for callous execution by General Sani Abacha's murder squads. Only God saved him from what could have been a most gruesome, officially sanctioned, assassination when the car in which he was riding was mercilessly sprayed with bullets in broad daylight on the streets of Lagos in January 1997. Mercifully, he survived that murderous encounter and outlived the dictator to supervise the eventual enthronement of democracy in 1999¹⁴.

He goes further to state that, "Since Nigeria's independence also, the epic struggle against tyranny, injustice, and oppression perpetrated by military despots and civilian autocrats is one area in which the Yoruba have remained indomitable and peerless. Pa Adesanya was emblematic of the characteristic Yoruba doggedness and fearlessness in confronting evil in all its ramifications. You will remember also the monumental struggles waged relentlessly by other Yoruba titans such as Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti, Mr. Femi Falana, Dr. Frederick Fasehun, General Alani Akinrinade, Professor Wole Soyinka, Mr. Ayo Opadokun, Chief Ayo Adebajo, Chief Olu Falae, Dr. Kayode Fayemi, Sir Olaniwun Ajayi, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and others too numerous to mention. It was the preponderance and dominant influence of these indefatigable Yoruba titans that made some opportunistic, ill-informed and self-serving commentators to conclude that the struggle for the actualization of the June 12 mandate was made a Yoruba affair¹⁵".

The contributions of the Yoruba to the Nigerian cause were not limited to the above position stated by Fawole. It is on record that the pursuits of the need for Nigerian unity and continued existence have taken primacy of place in Yoruba sectional and national agenda.

Lamenting on the diminishing significance of the Yoruba race in Nigerian political space, Fawole further states that

It is a matter of grave concern that, having done all that and more, the position of the Yoruba nation within the

Nigerian commonwealth remains the most precarious, pathetic, unenviable, if not lamentable, over fifty years after independence. It is equally profoundly ironic that the Yoruba nation that was in the forefront of the struggle to liberate Nigeria from colonial domination, and a model of post-independence progress and development, could so suddenly become deprived of good and accountable political leadership such that its position within both its own domain in Western Nigeria and the larger Nigerian society is deplorable. What was it that went wrong, and at what point did the people make the wrong turn? Is it ever possible to trace the steps back to the glorious days of yore when the peerless Yoruba people were respected, envied and sometimes feared, even by murderous dictators? Was it not the temerity of such intrepid Yoruba leaders like Chief Michael Adegunle Ajasin, Abraham Adesanya and their NADECO compatriots that made Abacha tremble? Why have we not reproduced such committed men of uncommon boldness and leadership qualities? These questions beg for answers that cannot be provided in a single lecture¹⁶.

In the final analysis, though the Yoruba nation still commands a considerable level of influence in the country's political space with notable Yoruba personalities occupying ministerial positions like Prof. Yemi Osibanjo (Vice President), Babatunde Fashola (Power Housing and Works), Kayode Fayemi (Solid Minerals), Kemi Adeosun (Finance), Adebayo Shittu (Communication), Lai Mohammed (Information, Culture and Tourism), those influences are still subject of keen questioning given their contribution to the Nigerian agenda of comprehensive drive for development and the call for oneness which is fast diminishing because of agitations and action of elements that have consistently questioned the country's existence.

The 2023 national political space have be thrown open with debates on power shift to the South of Nigeria, with contention between the South West and South. However, given Yoruba's place in contemporary national discourse and the emergence of the present administration, it is fundamentally essential that, the Nigeria political elite across national divide

advocate for power shift to the South where all the states in the region will rally round of their own for equity, justice and good conscience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has explored the place and existence of the Yoruba race through its historical existence and the roles played by its sons and daughters in the emergence of Nigeria. Like every ethnic group that holds a place in Nigeria's existence, the Yoruba have contributed immensely to the birth and rebirth process of a viable Nigeria. But in spite of all the immense roles, their place in the scheme of things has been questioned. Given this position, the paper recommends that:

- 1) The intellectual, economic, social and religious advantages possessed by the Yoruba nation be given considerable recognition and primacy of place by the nation handlers, which should be reciprocated in other places where the Yoruba race is found.
- 2) The patriotic spirits of the Yoruba to national cause should be explored for the country to achieve its desire of oneness given the several of conflicting agitations and conflict that are threatening the continued existence of the country.
- 3) Also, given the fact that the Yoruba are innovative and industrious, the country should explore this advantage to engage her in making the dreams of the country's founding fathers a reality.
- 4) Finally, there is the need for the Yoruba to imbibe the spirit of oneness while pursuing their collective interest as division within the race can limit their chances of occupying the positions due to them in the Nigeria politics. Therefore, the need for synergy of purpose and aspiration is in fundamental requirement for the Yoruba nation.
- 5) It is important to underscore the fact the development and relevance due the Yoruba in the current Nigerian political will not be achieved by wishful thinking or by dwelling on the monumental accomplishments of the past but through pragmatic involvement of all in charting a progressive cause for the Yoruba race.

Endnotes

See Bamitale Omole See Bascom, W (1969), *The Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria*. Holt: Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

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