

Atlantic Yoruba *and the* Expanding Frontiers of Yoruba Culture and Politics



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ABSTRACT

Written in an erudite yet accessible style, this lecture begins with a moral allusion to a historical Yoruba curse as attributed to the Awole story in Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas* in order to explicate the enslavement, fragmentation, and marginalization of an otherwise royal people. Far from dwelling on this mortal curse, it examines the aftermath of the Atlantic Yoruba dispersal, the renovation and regeneration of the ancestral Yoruba diaspora, cultural diaspora, as well as the continuities of "kingships" and kinships across the Atlantic World. From the discussion of history; memory; Yorubaism; resistance and nationalism; regenerative religious traditions; new Yoruba diaspora cultures and complex modernity; to Yoruba immigrants and the role of Nollywood in the appropriation and critique of culture, the thesis remains cogent and consistent: an imagined Yoruba future must take cognizance of comparativism and contrasts as Yoruba *insiders* and *outsiders within cultures* formulate and foster a dialogue of minds in order to create a lasting legacy of Yoruba humanity and progress well beyond the confines of southwestern Nigeria and even beyond such diasporic spaces as Cuba, Trinidad, Haiti, Brazil, and the United States towards a new dispensation of engaging globalization with a viable

Yoruba culture in the theorization of universal ideals. For the most part, this Lecture seeks to exhort Yoruba culture within the Omoluwabi frame of analysis and its implications for the younger generation at home and abroad who now relish in Western values in opposition to their own—thus making a clarion call in tandem with Hubert Ogunde’s “Yoruba Ronu” to appeal to both the young and the old, the continental and the Atlantic Yoruba alike to develop the Yoruba and their institutions.

Ijuba (Homage):

[The Chairman of this occasion, Your Royal Highnesses, the Chairman and members of the Organizing Committee of the J.F. Odunjo Memorial Lectures, members of the family of Chief J. F. Odunjo, lovers of Yoruba language and history, the University of Ibadan community, ladies and gentlemen, etc., I am honored to have been selected as the J. F. Odunjo Memorial Scholar for 2012, and to deliver this lecture. I owe my foundational literacy in Yoruba to Odunjo's Alawiye Series, and I mastered them so early that I began to represent my school in the regional competitions famous in the late 1950s and 1960s, and actually won a prize for poetry recitation and a group drama presentation. We thank the Odunjo family for keeping his memory alive, and honoring him in a dignified academic manner. Starting in 1984 with the first lecture delivered by Professor Ayo Bamgbose, successive scholars have been outstanding, and I can only make a modest contribution.]

The Yoruba have become truly global: in terms of their locations in different parts of the world; the representations of various aspects of their culture (including religion, art, music, dress, and cuisine), in these locations; the emergence of distinctive Yoruba Orisa traditions in the Americas; the physical presence, in various parts of the world, of the descendants of Yoruba people taken as slaves and now as voluntary migrants in the contemporary era; and the integration of Yoruba in African studies, Diaspora Studies, the Black Atlantic, and Atlantic history.

The geographic location of this lecture is the Atlantic, a site that unites the Yoruba in Nigeria with the coastal areas of West Africa, with Europe, and the Americas. Within this Atlantic unit, the Yoruba are located far and wide, not just along the coastlines but in the hinterland as well. The Yoruba in diaspora reveal to us profound imaginations of diasporic movements and connections, the process and outcome of cultural hybridization and identity formation, and the strategies of adaptation and social integration in diverse locations in different historical formations.

Yoruba oral narratives have actually privileged diasporic events and episodes. Our early mythologies are actually inaugurated by a diaspora: the story of the princes leaving Ile-Ife to establish kingdoms, settlements and towns is a story of a diaspora in formation. As the scattered princes of Ile-Ife were linked to an ancestor—Oduduwa—the unity in diversity was inscribed, reinforced by ceremonies and festivals. Thus, a notion of ancestral diaspora was created; also connected to a cultural diaspora as in, for example, the spread of the ideas of kingship and political centralization. Primary migrations fueled secondary

ones—if Oranmiyan is credited with founding Oyo-Ile, so too did many leave Oyo-Ile to create new settlements; and internal movements created a larger network, from Ile-Ife to Ife-Aana in Togo.

The mythological origin of the diaspora became further reinforced by a historic event, a violent outcome of power struggles and a mortal curse. Samuel Johnson locates the struggles in the post-*Alaafin* Abiodun era (1780s), casting Abiodun as the dividing period between peace and war, prosperity and poverty, success and failure. This was in the late 18th century. Awole, Abiodun's cousin, succeeded him (1789-c.1796) and was beset by the problems of power rivalries with and among his chiefs, growing traffic in the sale of slaves abroad, the ambition of chiefs to profit from it, and political miscalculations over the competitive struggles for high-ranking titles. The outcome was a mutiny by a disloyal faction of the army who sent an empty covered calabash to the king, indicating Awole's rejection and the prompt for him to commit suicide. In most dramatic language, Johnson brings his impressive but depressing Awole's narrative to a close:

There being no alternative His Majesty set his house in order; but before he committed suicide, he stepped out into the palace quadrangle with face stern and resolute, carrying in his hands an earthenware dish and three arrows. He shot one to the North, one to the South, and one to the West uttering those ever-memorable imprecations, "My curse be on you for your disloyalty and disobedience, so let your children disobey you. If you send them on an errand, let them never return to bring you word again. To all the points I shot my arrows will ye be carried

as slaves. My curse will carry you to the sea and beyond the seas, slaves will rule over you, and you their masters will become slaves.

With this he raised and dashed the earthenware dish on the ground smashing it into pieces, saying “Igba la iso a ki iso awo, beheni ki oro mi o se to!” (a broken calabash can be mended, but not a broken dish; so let my words be—irrevocable!)¹

I fully understand Johnson’s mindset, grounded in a theological way of thinking. And we cannot conflate myth with history. However, human beings make sense of their experience using mythic frameworks, just as Johnson who was witnessing events that produced wars and captives who were sold abroad. His account, therefore, is a sensible presentation of a violent foundation for a diaspora, in this case manifested as a greater number of Yoruba entering the traffic of the slave trade more than ever before, with many finding themselves in Cuba. The selling of Yoruba into slavery increased dramatically in the post-Awole years, reaching its peak around the mid-1820s, a trend that was sustained till about 1850, when the trade began to decline, and ended in the late 1860s, although enslavement continued and was integrated into domestic economies. Recent estimates put the total shipment to about 1.12 million, about 80% taken between 1750 and 1850, and

1 Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos: C.S.S. Bookshop, 1921, 1973 reprint), 192.

cumulatively representing about 9% of the African population sold into slavery.²

The core of the activities and struggles of Yoruba lives abroad has actually been to mend a broken calabash, to retain Awole's metaphor; and to reinvent the wheel to make new earthenware since, as Awole reminded us, the broken dish cannot be put together. Like the broken calabash and pots, lives in exile are fragmented, spirits have been broken, but restorative and redemptive efforts are equally as powerful.

There was equally a third force, associated with trade and other economic opportunities which enabled the Yoruba to spread within West Africa. Nineteenth century data are clear that the Yoruba were long distance traders; both men and women travelled over wide distances to buy and sell among the Kanuri, Hausa and Nupe, their near neighbors, and in far-flung places in the North. They went to Benin to their east, and much further to the Congo valley. Westwards, they were noted in almost all Aja towns, and moved further west to the Senegal valley.

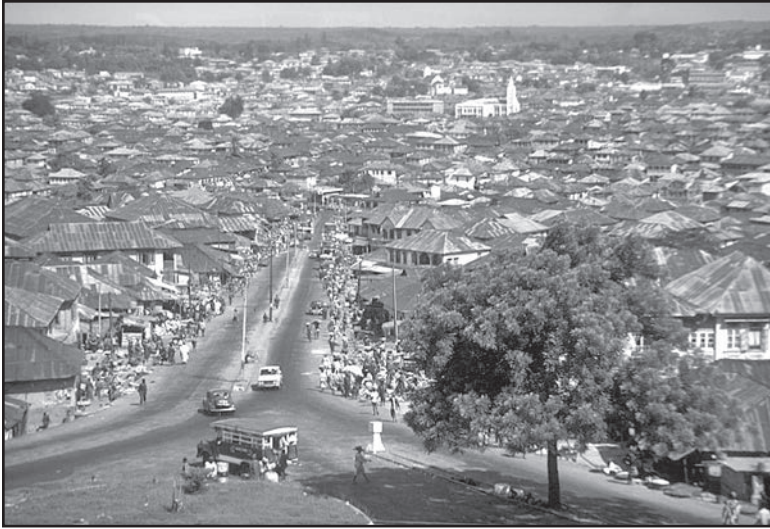
As we moved into the twentieth century, the traffic intensified. By the 1920s, large numbers were reported in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) with a trading network that spread as far as the Gambia. They penetrated both the cities and the rural areas, and emerged, in the case of

2 Impressive records can be found in David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

the Gold Coast studied by J. S. Eades,³ as the largest and most successful trading network, with prominent citizens, rich merchants, and Yoruba colonies. The network shared information and distributed capital to consolidate their economic power. Yoruba culture spread with them, and they were even able to invite guests and musicians from Western Nigeria to Togo, Republic of Benin, Ghana, and Ivory Coast to join them in major celebrations such as marriages and funerals. Disaster struck in 1969: there was a mass expulsion which forced thousands to return home to Nigeria from Ghana.

As the Yoruba moved to other parts of West Africa and to far away lands in the Americas and Europe, they continued to maintain and create mythical, genetic and cultural ties to their homeland. They have become intercultural and transnational, claiming to be both ethnic and trans-ethnic. Yoruba culture has fragmented and reproduced in new forms in different Atlantic locations—along the sea coasts and their hinterlands. To connect the Yoruba in Abeokuta in Nigeria with those in London, cultural heritage becomes a marker, as well as genetics. Colonial politics lumped them in Nigeria into what became the Western Region, creating a colonial marker that became a unit of political formation and competition for power. Post-colonial experience has consolidated Yoruba ethnicity in the politics of Nigeria. Those who were forced to migrate in the years of the Atlantic slave trade fell on Yoruba culture to create new identities. The contemporary

3 J. S. Eades, *Strangers and Traders: Yoruba Migrants, Markets And the State in Northern Ghana* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994).



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ones chose the tropes of modernization and globalization to keep affirming Yorubanness. Whether as members of the old or new migrations, Yoruba habits can be identified, often expressed forcefully in some places, invoking ideas on communities and worldview, as well as practices around Yoruba food (even of Orisa food), rituals, kinship cultures, etc. Whether in the clothes they wear or the food they eat, Yoruba culture is daily restaged in different parts of the world. This restaging forms the core of this lecture.

Various notions and labels can now describe the Yoruba—as a nation, if the reference is to their location in West Africa; as a language identifying members of a linguistic group; as an identity, if Yorubanness is defined in terms of some common unifying characteristics; as a religion and spirituality for those who venerate any of the gods and goddesses in the Orisa tradition; and as a culture which means that those who practice elements they iden-

tify as Yoruba need not live in West Africa but may be found in New Zealand or Australia.

Yoruba has become a consciousness of being. This consciousness has a regional dimension, such as being born in Iwo or Ede; but it has a diasporic connection, such as being a native of Bahia in Brazil, as well as a transnational dimension, as in the case of Toyin Falola of Austin, Texas. The consciousness can be ethnic, as in characterizing Yoruba as an ethnicity in modern Nigeria. But it can be inherited, as in the case of Afro-Cubans of Oyo descent. It can be dual or multiple, as in cases of inter-marriages. It can be historic, as in the case of millions of people whose original ancestry is Yoruba now living in Haiti or Jamaica. And it can be philosophical and scholarly, as there are scholars of Yoruba cosmology who are Caucasians: William Bascom was perhaps the first to highlight for the world the literary, philosophical, and scientific interconnectedness of Ifa divination. A slew of Yoruba scholars, including Justine Cordwell, William Fagg, Frank Willett, Robert Farris Thompson, Henry Drewal, and Andrew Apter facilitated, we might argue, the intellectualization of the Yoruba Diaspora.

From this consciousness has emerged a notion of political awareness and political aspirations by ambitious individuals. Within Nigeria, it translates as competition for power in the national center, struggles for positions and access to power, discussions of revenue allocations, and the belief that the pace of modernization and progress would have been accelerated if the Yoruba had constituted an autonomous political unit. Outside of Nigeria, political awareness takes multiple forms. In the older diaspora of slavery, it was used to construct cultural communities.



YORUBA CARVING ON THE DOORS OF A ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

For contemporary migrants, it forms the basis to establish associations, home-town networks, etc.

Consciousness may be used to strengthen political awareness. Political awareness, in turn, may be used to promote consciousness. Both may combine to produce

the equivalent of an ideology. There are many people in the Americas who use “Yoruba” in ideological terms—how to live without appropriating Western traditions or how to combat Western values with Yoruba ones or how to preserve and use alternative social and cultural mores. When constructed as an ideology, the assumptions are that elements of Yoruba culture are sufficient to live an orderly life, to engage the reality of existence, and to confront the obstacles of life.

This lecture is about the Yoruba as a diaspora at two main levels: the diaspora of slavery; and the contemporary diaspora in the age of globalization. The older and newer ones will be connected by ideas of Yoruba “ethnicity” and nationality, by how the diaspora of slavery created enduring legacies that survive to date, and how these legacies are being extended by the contemporary generation of Yoruba migrants. The diaspora of slavery tapped into an African-Yoruba past to adjust and survive in a milieu of slavery. Although attempts were made to erase ethnicities and call all Africans “black,” Yoruba ethnicity existed long term, as the enslaved retained their sense of history and culture in order to hang on to an identity. On the one hand, the Yoruba related with other African slaves, yet on the other hand, they used associations and culture to come together.

The contemporary Yoruba abroad are transnationalists who maintain contacts with the Yoruba at home. The Yoruba diaspora has globalized Yoruba culture, and developed Yoruba consciousness. Whether in the older or more recent migrations, the Yoruba needed to create effective organizational strategies to cope with new locations. The details of these strategies show elements of the Yoruba

method of mobility. Social practices such as respect for elders, naming ceremonies, celebrations, and funerals have been understood in the context of Yoruba culture.

Yoruba culture, of course, is not static in any particular era. The Atlantic Yoruba, in creating processes of self-definition and identity construction, understood the necessity of change. Thus, we can even speak of Yoruba identities in a multi-plural sense in terms of time, space, and individuality. Identity ascription, a process which also occurred, meant that individuals could borrow and create, blending with other ethnicities or nationalities, such that we can speak of Yoruba-Brazilian or Yoruba-American. As the Yoruba homeland has also always been divided into multiple sub-groups such as Ekiti, Ijesa, Oyo, Igbomina, etc., the Atlantic Yoruba also combine the ideas of the Yoruba nation with those of Yoruba towns and cities, suggesting that the understanding of ethnicity is more plastic than immutable. The individual could claim to be part of a larger Yoruba collective when the identity creates a set of advantages or confers nationalistic prestige. In that collective sense, myths of origins can be shared, reference to Oduduwa can be made, and events that lend themselves to group memory can be emphasized.

However, as the case of contemporary transnationalists shows, they can also be organized on the basis of their specific cities, as in the case of Egbe Omo Ibadan of Chicago or the Ilawe Progressive Association in New York. The Eko Club in Houston is one of the strongest. This level of organizing also occurred in previous eras. In the nineteenth century, the wars between groups affected how various Yoruba cities and sub-groups solidified their

identities and plotted their politics. Collaboration and socialization can occur at the level of being Yoruba, but also of being Egba, Ekiti or Ijebu.

Religions also supplied differences that led to sub or specific Yoruba identities, such as Yoruba Muslims, Yoruba Christians, Yoruba Santeria, etc., which in turn led to arguments over culture, power, representation, and politics. Religion intersects with issues of networking, self-definition, expectations, and sociability.

Thus, in speaking of the Yoruba, there can be no single story or single definition, nor even an attempt to construct and impose a pure identity onto others in far-flung places such as Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and Birmingham in London. To take a random example, a Yoruba may eat pork but another Yoruba may not eat pork if his religion forbids it, but neither will use pork consumption to erase their sense of a “nation,” notwithstanding religious differences. There are equally generational differences in taste and preferences. Using the case of the Mahi of Dahomey in Brazil as a case study, Mariza De Carvalho Soares has made an observation that can be applied to the Yoruba as well; incidentally Mahi’s neighbors in West Africa were co-slaves in Brazil:

The meanings, markers, and discourses that identified a given nation could not be gathered and passed down, like a bag of valuables, to the later generations of African descendants born in Brazil. Only Africans brought to Brazil could belong to a nation, because the whole premise of the nation—which was an aspect of Portuguese Imperial power—depended on one’s place of birth in the colonial universe, not



on lineage. At the same time, as we saw with the term *naturalidade*, the colonial concept of “nation” carried the built-in implication that something, some inherent ethnic quality linked to the homeland, could be inherited. But the argument for an unchanging ethnic heritage is complicated, both theoretically and historically, by the emergence of African-descended creoles in Brazil who developed other social practices.⁴

As we can see from many diaspora cases, the experience and identity of those who left as slaves are different from

4 Mariza De Carvalho Soares, *People of Faith: Slavery and African Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*, translated by Jerry D. Metz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 235-6.

those of contemporary migrants. Thus, the Afro-Brazilians of Yoruba descent in Bahia and recent Yoruba migrants to the same city do not necessarily blend well, just as African Americans and “Continental Africans” (the label for new migrants) in the United States also do not blend and can actually manifest conflicts. Nevertheless, “the base of shared identity,” to use Soares’s phrase,⁵ has created a permanent sense of common expression of history and labeling.

MIGRATIONS

The massive expansion of the Yoruba occurred in the context of the Atlantic World, the four continents united by the Atlantic Ocean. The Yoruba were among the African slaves drawn from Central and West Africa and tragically relocated to the Americas. As the enslaved, they were funneled to the Atlantic. After the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, secondary migrations occurred as freed slaves returned to West Africa, and thousands migrated within various countries in the Atlantic World.

In my co-edited book, *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World*,⁶ the contributors have examined the history of the Yoruba in different countries. The slave trade violently took the Yoruba to several places in the Americas: Brazil, Cuba, Uruguay, Argentina, Haiti, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States. There are characteristics and patterns. The breakdown reflects the following: first is location, a) in an extensive land mass

5 Ibid., 235.

6 Toyin Falola and Matt Childs, eds. *The Yoruba in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

from Rio de la Plata in South America to the Chesapeake Bay in North America, and small islands in the West Indies; b) in North America, areas of concentrations were in Virginia, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina and North Carolina; c) in Central America, the Yoruba were taken to Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua; d) in South America, the Yoruba were found in Brazil, Suriname, Guyana and Venezuela; and e) in the West Indies, they were taken to Cuba, St. Lucia, Saint-Domingo (Haiti), Barbados, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago. A second relevant aspect is concentration: in sizeable numbers in relation to the totality of African slaves, the Yoruba were concentrated in three places—Bahia in Brazil, Cuba, and Saint-Domingue. In these places, their value was mainly in their labor, working on plantations and processing firms that produced sugarcane, sugar, tobacco, cotton and other profitable crops; in mines, as domestic servants; and in such other economic sectors as ports and commerce.

While the Yoruba cultural influences were the strongest in Cuba, Bahia, and Saint-Domingue, they equally established a noticeable impact in other places where their numbers were smaller. Some impacts were Yoruba-based, that is, based on elements that we can define primarily as Yoruba. Other newer influences were part of the creolization of cultures as the Yoruba interacted with slaves from other African ethnicities and with European-derived cultures and institutions such as the church and family. Creole cultures, with Yoruba elements in them, have emerged over time. Davis Eltis, in his contribution to my book, points to the disproportionate contribution of the Yoruba to cumulative African creolization and hybridity:

Within coerced African migration, the Yoruba were among the latest to arrive but were neither the most numerous nor the least scattered over the Americas. Reasonably precise estimates for other groups will eventually become available; but it is probable that Igbo and some West-Central African peoples were larger and more heavily concentrated than the Yoruba—the Igbo in parts of the British Caribbean and some of what have been termed the Congo groups in southeast Brazil. Yet the impact of the Yoruba speakers on Creole societies that emerged in many parts of the Americas appears to modern scholars to have been strong and, in the light of the evidence presented here, out of proportion to the relative size of Yoruba arrivals.⁷

Attempts to find explanations for the observation by Eltis are ongoing; tentative suggestions include the strength, richness and durability of the Yoruba culture in their homeland; their skills at cultural retention; as well as their cultural domination of West Africa before and during the period of their enslavement.

The Yoruba extended themselves in West Africa and gained tremendous influence in various parts, notably along the coastal areas. This remarkable influence, characterized by John Thornton as “cultural intercommunications,” is owed to two forces: migrations by the Yoruba within the region, as well as migrations to the region by those who returned back from the Americas. By the seventeenth century, Yoruba language and various aspects of its culture had become widespread along the West

7 David Eltis, “The Diaspora of Yoruba Speakers, 1650-1865: Dimensions and Implications,” in Falola and Childs, *The Yoruba Diaspora*, 33.



SANTERIA IN BRAZIL

African coast. The impact of Yoruba language on Aja and Edo languages is uncontested. So too are the elements of Yoruba religion and kingship, ideas of state formation and mythological origins in these and some other places in West Africa. In far away Gambia, Yoruba cuisine including *eko* and *olele*, became well known, while the egungun was adopted and integrated into their cultural practices. The empire of Oyo contributed to this regional dominance, as Oyo exerted its power to create an extensive trading network, and adopted the expansion of Yoruba culture as a strategy of colonization and of soft diplomacy to link

subdued areas to the metropole. Professor S. A. Akintoye has used one example to link the impact of Oyo on another West African group with Yoruba cultural dominance in the Atlantic World:

Founded and led by a mixture of Yoruba and Aja elements, the kingdom of Dahomey minutely mirrored Yoruba cultural institutions and traditions, all of which were later reinforced by Oyo conquest and overlordship. In particular through the Dahomey and other Aja people taken as slaves across the Atlantic, the influence of Yoruba culture was already significant in a number of places, for instance, Saint-Domingue (Haiti), long before the arrival of Yoruba slaves, and considerably assisted the growth of Yoruba cultural influence after that point.⁸

The reverse diaspora of enslaved Yoruba returning to West Africa in combination with intra-regional migrations within West Africa, contributed enormously to the spread of Yoruba over a wider region, also connecting West Africa to the Atlantic. Known as *Aku* in Sierra Leone, the returnees contributed to the widespread nature of Yoruba culture. Not only did they spread the notion of the Yoruba as a nation, fusing the various Yoruba sub-ethnic groups under one umbrella, a number of them acquired the modernity of literacy and Christianity—which became the vehicle of transforming the Yoruba in the nineteenth century and giving them enormous educational and social advantages in the twentieth century. Atlantic ideas of politics and economy spread to West Africa through the *Aku* who in

8 S. Adebajji Akintoye, *A History of the Yoruba* (Dakar, Senegal: Amalion Publishers, 2010), 367-8.



turn served as agents of dissemination. Their imaginations of modernity were rich and deep, embedded in notions of race, nation and ethnicity. The Aku constructed ideas of Yoruba nationhood and cultural nationalism, pointing to common origins and cultural similarities. Yoruba cultural nationalism and self assertion emerged in the nineteenth century, later to be also transformed in the 1940s as political nationalism, most clearly manifested in the formation of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa.

YORUBAISM

Presence is one thing, impact is another. Be it in Brazil or the United States, the diversity of those countries, even when not recognized, is grounded in the multiple histories and experiences of different groups and ethnicities from various countries. Among the citizens in these places are people with Yoruba roots. Where the roots are denied or

unappreciated, or simply not known, alienation develops. This consciousness has been expressed time and again in various poems, essays, and texts to underscore how diaspora groups seek recognition, self-depiction, collective affirmation, and cultural authenticity.

Where the demographic presence made it possible, the Yoruba formed communities, and reinvented a new “nation” with its own king, chiefs, and rules. They formed an identity that others recognized, defined as Yoruba, which meant that they were able to transfer and negotiate an identity for themselves. In Brazil, the Nago, and in Cuba, the Lucumi established considerable impact on religion, orality, families and social institutions. The Nago built various communities linked by elements of Yoruba culture—language, facial marks, celebrations, names, origin mythologies, drums, songs, music, and more. The Yoruba gods and goddesses became defined as pan-Yoruba and migrated into an overarching religion of Candomblé, which in turn was used to reinforce Yoruba ethnicity.

Whether by orality or literacy, the Yoruba have contributed to developments and discussions of religion, culture, ethnicity, gender, and other issues that define migrations, globalization, and multiculturalism. These discussions foreground the reality of culture as a mosaic. Thus, on the one hand, they adopted cultural elements from their hosts and demonstrated the dictum, “when-in-Rome-behave-as-Romans” formula. By so doing, they respected other peoples and their cultures and knew what to take from them. There was no desire to pursue a project of ethnic absolutism. On the other hand, they sought to promote and protect what they regarded as the core values of their



cultures. In combining those two options—borrowing and maintaining—the Yoruba affirmed the principles of assimilation and cultural retention, of creolization.

They migrated Yoruba words, using them to create new words or new meanings. Images, an aspect that is often ignored in the literature, were created to embody a wide range of ideas. Even without the facility of literacy in the Euro-American tradition, they composed ideas with images, using symbols and dislocated alphabets to gener-

ate new meanings, produce new calligraphies, and make statements on autographies.

As with other African slaves, the Yoruba were given new names and many were converted to Christianity. They redefined a number of practices in Catholicism, as we see in the examples of Vodun, Candomblé, or Santería.

When they became free, adaptations to economic circumstances dictated learning new trades and crafts. Thus, in Cuba and Brazil, we had Yoruba as shoemakers, tailors, barbers, hawkers, etc. They formed guilds and constructed economic networks such as the Esusu method which enabled them to save and invest. They respected the successful among themselves. In the case of Bahia, a number of streets were named after the Yoruba, while freedmen and women who clustered together lived in such a place as Nagotedo (“Nago-established”), a way of claiming their own autonomous space.

The Orisa tradition is one of the most visible aspects of Yorubaism with the Candomblé practices in Brazil, made visible by devotees and the activities of Babalorixás and Iyalorixás. In Cuba, the Lucumi (the name for Yoruba) practice Santería.⁹ In Haiti, there is Vodun, an integral part of Nago culture. Egungun and Gelede have spread in Latin America and the Caribbean, even in such places as Trinidad and Tobago. In the United States, many variants of Yoruba religion have survived, especially in Louisiana and South Carolina.

9 The literature on Santería is extensive. Among others, see Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: African Spirits in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988; reprint 1993).

The survival of these religious practices has exposed other aspects of culture: the use of language, food habits, expressive traditions, activities of diviners, priests, drummers, medicine, etc. Each and all show the richness of culture, including its use in creating nationalism and self assertion, allowing for the conquest of new spaces (as in the Yoruba domination of Bahia, Brazil). Various studies have pointed to the use of Yoruba language in Brazil and Cuba. Pierre Verge wrote extensively on Yoruba medicinal plants and the incantations that made them work.¹⁰ Studies on music have indicated the use of Yoruba drums, words, and mythologies in Afoxés and Axé music.

RESISTANCE AND NATIONALISM

Countless Yoruba women and men of courage imagined freedom and sought new spaces and a world of independence from slavery and the plantation system. Resistance and nationalism took various forms, covert and overt, spiritual and secular.

Using Yoruba culture, they engaged in processes of cultural rebirth and collective affirmation. As stifling and crippling as the plantation systems were, there were a number of Yoruba people who demonstrated enormous courage in rebelling against enslavement and domination.

10 Pierre Fatumbi Verge, *Ewe: The Use of Plants in Yoruba Society* (Sao Paulo, Brazil: Companhia das Letras, 1995). See also Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Robert A. Voeks, *Sacred Leaves of Candomble: African Magic, Medicine, And Religion in Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

The condition of slavery gave birth to cultural expressions that tapped into Yoruba ideas, practices and history, making language and religious practices resilient in the face of powerful attacks. These expressions were in turn nurtured by a sense of nostalgia, the search for liberation. Even to worship a Yoruba god was interpreted by those in power as a militant expression. Mythologies became very powerful devices of remembering, of re-enacting aspects of the past, of formulating practices for the future, of aesthetic imagination. Mythologies supplied the basis for creating ideologies of acculturation to Yoruba identity outside of the Yoruba homeland.

Enslaved communities, as with colonized subjects, are ridiculed by those in power. To fight back, the Yoruba turned to their mythologies to indict slave masters and colonizers, and to ridicule the culture imposed on them. In turning to Yoruba gods, they subverted repressive forces and actors. In creating hybrid religious forms, they borrowed clandestinely to accept a culture and then strategically reinvent it. Turning Yoruba gods into the equivalences of Catholic saints was not in any way an affirmation of the inferiority of their own heritage nor dependency on a borrowed one, but a recognition of their own in a way that relocate them to the center of worship. They were not making a plea for Sango or Yemoja to be recognized by repressive forces but that such forces were powerless to destroy their own heritage. By turning to their own history and drawing from it to construct a cultural presence, they created the legitimacy for Yoruba practices to spread globally. Indeed, the Yoruba were critical of themselves as they sought new ways to practice culture, debating issues



around authenticity and orthodoxy, but in the process they legitimized their presence and successfully reproduced their culture for over five hundred years. Outsiders to the cultures ultimately accepted Yoruba practices, and by the twentieth century they became part of legitimate academic fields.

The aesthetics that shaped cultural practices were aggressive: slavery experiences that had dehumanized and disempowered the enslaved called for such templates. Combative aesthetics sought redemption and cleansing. The new mythologies, songs, and dances had the unmistakable mark of combat, even of violence, as all were invoked to attain liberation. Yoruba supplied many resources to counter the imposition of Euro-American culture and values. When acculturation took place, which was expected in new lands, resources were available to fight its absurd elements. More importantly, Yoruba resources prevented imposed acculturation from becoming an acceptable mythology. Yoruba mythologies were powerful enough to counter Euro-American mythologies. Euro-American acculturation strategies, whether in slave systems in America or colonized Africa were based on the same premise: slaves and subjects were inferior, the conquerors superior. Inferior culture, so goes the assumption, would ultimately be “civilized,” a belief, once described by a literary critic as an “absurd nationalistic mythology,”¹¹ that was even at the root of concrete political and bureaucratic policies.

Cultural manifestations translated into a myriad of concrete actions, most notably of slave revolts. The Yoruba were among those agile and free blacks who played leadership roles in a number of revolutionary actions in and around the Americas. Violent insurrections involved the ability of the leaders to mobilize other slaves and to build alliances with free people of color. Jane Landers described these revolutionaries as “Atlantic creoles,” and provided

11 Russell Hamilton, *Voices from an Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), viii.



evidence for the 18th century of how, among others, Yoruba royalists, maroons, and counter-revolutionaries fought against the slave system, gained freedom, and even established autonomy for themselves.¹² Among them were José Antonio Aponte, a famous Yoruba who led the 1812 revolt against slavery in Havana Cuba, and Juan Nepomenceno Prieto, the well-known leader of a Yoruba brotherhood called the Lucumi, also in Cuba. In the 1830s, Prieto greeted incoming Yoruba slaves at the dock and served as their patron. As Landers added more examples, she cited Ira Berlin who described the cast as possessing “linguis-

12 Jane G. Landers, *Atlantic Creoles In the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

tic dexterity, cultural plasticity, and social agility.”¹³ This was at a very difficult moment, when slavery was firmly entrenched. This hidden history, told with several examples in multiple locations by Landers, shows courage, political sagacity and wisdom:

Because Atlantic Creoles were so often on the front lines of these contests—European and American revolutions, Indian wars, slave revolts, and the international efforts to abolish slavery—they were keenly attuned to shifting political currents. These African and African-descended actors had access to a wide range of political information, both printed and oral, and they made reasoned and informed choices in their attempt to win and maintain liberty. They were often critical to the balance of power and soon became adept at interpreting political events and manipulating them, when possible, to achieve freedom. Their initiative and agency—their acts of resistance, flight, and marronage (the formation of fugitive slave communities in the wild), and their shifting relationships to various European, American, and Native American powers—shaped the course of international events, as well as local responses to them.¹⁴

They understood multiple cultures, plantation regimes, and European languages. They formed families where they impacted African-derived cultures. They were products of

13 Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 64. Also quoted in Landers, *Atlantic Creoles*, 3.

14 *Ibid.*, 5.

their age, able to factor political exigencies into the reality of living and to work with fluid identities as political skills. “Atlantic creoles,” Landers concludes, “were extraordinarily mobile, both geographically and socially, and their horizons had few limits.”¹⁵

A linkage has been established between conflicts in Africa, enslavement and migration patterns. A link has also been established between the military and cultural background of slaves and major slave revolts, as in the 1739 Stono Revolt in South Carolina, the Haitian Revolution of 1804, the Aponte rebellion in Cuba in 1812, and the 1835 Malé revolt in Brazil. We can see the role of the Yoruba in some of these. The 1812 rebellion in Cuba was connected to the Yoruba. During the 18th century, the Oyo Empire made thousands captives who were then sold as slaves in the Atlantic slave trade. Slaves were also sold in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, captives from the wars that led to the fall of Oyo and the struggles by its successor states, notably Ibadan and Ijaye, for dominance. Many of these slaves made it to Cuba. Matt D. Childs who has written a brilliant book on the 1812 Aponte rebellion, summarized the direct linkage with the Yoruba:

Given the high influx of Africans into Cuba as a result of the collapse of the Oyo Empire, and the ability of Yoruba culture to have “an impact out of all proportions to its relative demographic weight,” according to historian David Eltis, the military background of slaves may have likely contributed to a proclivity for rebellion. The marked increase in revolts during the decades of 1790 and 1800

15 Ibid., 13.

testifies to a heightened commitment to resistance by Africans in Cuba. Political events in the Atlantic world, from revolution in Europe to independence in the Americas to civil wars in Africa, all exerted an influence in Cuba that polarized society by strengthening a commitment to racial slavery for masters, while cracking the foundations upon which Spanish rule rested.¹⁶

As in Cuba and elsewhere, the Yoruba were able to come together in associations that were then converted to a variety of uses, to assist one another or, as in the case of the Aponte rebellion, to unite and fight. As Aponte demonstrated, they were current with information and strategies from elsewhere: they understood their immediate environment, even if they sometimes underestimated the level of betrayal by fellow slaves and free blacks; and they knew how to use African cultures and certain commonalities to unite themselves. One common organization was the “brotherhood” in Cuba and Brazil. Called the *cabildos* in Cuba, members formed fraternities to discuss and promote common interests. Variants of Yoruba Ogboni society, sometimes organized in secrecy by men, found their ways to the Americas. Unlike in Oyo or Abeokuta where the Ogboni could advise kings, the members advised one another and plotted survival strategies. Being Yoruba made those associations possible, but the associations also reinforced an identity of Yoruba (Lucumi in Cuba and Nago in Brazil) in ways that were more visible than in other places. “Cuba (along with Brazil),” writes

16 Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba And The Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 35.



Childs, “represents something of an anomaly for African identity transformation in the Americas during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In other parts of the New World, a broad-based racial identity began to eclipse African ethnicities with the ending of the slave trade, the growth of a Creole slave population, and the gradual abolition of slavery. In Cuba, however, African ethnic identity remained strong due to the dramatic increase in slave imports.”¹⁷ Not only were the Yoruba able to maintain their self-definition as Yoruba, there were cases when

17 Ibid., 104.

some other ethnicities accepted Yoruba dominance and shared in their culture. There were also cases of accretion in which two ethnicities merged, as in Nago-Jeje in Candomblé houses in Brazil.

In moments of protest and violence, the consequences were drastic, but they ended more in the display of courage and resoluteness. In the Aponte rebellion, the authorities executed the twelve leaders, whipped many insurgents, and threw them into prison. The aspirations for freedom and justice were not killed whether in Cuba, Brazil, or the United States. On the day the Aponte leaders were killed, the authorities granted freedom to the collaborators who betrayed their colleagues and friends if only to make the statement that “the most effective strategy for gaining freedom was not armed rebellion but allegiance to masters and the Spanish Empire.”¹⁸ To make his point, the authorities executed thirty-four protesters and publicly humiliated seventy-eight of them by whipping, and putting one hundred and seventy in prison. Loyal slaves were also rewarded with freedom, although their masters had to be paid by the colonial authorities, judicial officials, and some citizens who donated money. However, the rewards did not stop the acts of resistance. In 1835, the Yoruba again revolted in Havana to seek an end to slavery and overthrow the government. Fearful of more uprisings, some slave masters began to call on Spain to end slavery while others called for greater vigilance. Childs noted the fear that gripped the authorities, and concluded that “The Aponte Rebellion illustrated in bold strokes the dangers of expanding slavery and plantation agriculture throughout

18 Ibid., 173.



the island.”¹⁹ Slave owners and the authorities, in fear and to protect their property, imposed stricter rules, and regulated the movements of slaves.

Slave rebellion occurred in other places during the nineteenth century, aided by widespread thoughts of freedom and the necessity of not just fighting slave owners but the governments that supported them. The slave revolt that began in Haiti August 1791 led to its independence in 1804, creating the only free black republic in the Western

19 Ibid., 178.

Hemisphere. Three years later in 1807, Yoruba and other African slaves began a series of over twenty insurrections,²⁰ with the biggest one, the Malé Rebellion, in 1835.²¹ Malé is a Yoruba word for Muslims. Thousands of enslaved Yoruba were taken to Bahia in Brazil in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Brought together in one location, Yoruba supplied a strong identity with manifestations that are still there today. The practice of Islam also provided a unifying point, as they came together to pray, listen to sermons, and use prayer meetings to discuss their depressing conditions and how to overcome them. The Yoruba strategized as to the timing of actions, including plans capturing arms from police barracks in order to attack plantation owners. As João José Reis, the Bahia-based scholar who has written a distinguished book on this subject notes, Yoruba and Islam constitute the two main ingredients that supplied the energy and synergy. “When Africans went into battle, to end slavery,” Childs summarizes Reis:

They wore amulets that contained folded Koranic verses written in Arabic containing fiery and revolutionary messages. Moreover, Muslims figured prominently among the rebels’ leadership. Like the Aponte Rebellion and Gabriels’s Conspiracy, mastery of the written word and the power of literacy served to structure the movement. And as in Cuba, free and enslaved urban artisans played a prominent role in the 1835 Malé Rebellion. In summary, the overwhelming African background of the rebellion,

20 João José Reis, “Slave Resistance in Brazil: Bahia, 1807-1835,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 25, no. 1 (1988): 111-44.

21 João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*. Translated by Arthur Brake. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).



and in particular its identity as Muslim, displayed the specific Atlantic cultural dynamics of the Bahian revolt, while the methods slaves and free people of color utilized in the

urban environment to resist slavery highlighted how they drew the local circumstances in executing their plans.²²

The power of Islam is reflected more broadly in protest politics, nationalism and grassroots politics.²³ Many Yoruba also used legal and political means to protest slavery, and to fight for abolition, as in the case of the Afro-Brazilian Luiz Goma, a politician, lawyer and writer who died in 1882, six years before the proclamation of abolition. The activities of Goma have even been compared with those of Frederick Douglass in the United States.²⁴ Furthermore, radical politics continued in the post-slavery years, expressed in various forms during the twentieth century.²⁵ The expression of “Africanity” has generated both political and cultural movements in all countries where the Yoruba can be found.

MEMORY

Forced relocation brought about by the Atlantic slave trade and the colonial subjugation by European powers

22 Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba And The Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery*, 184-5.

23 See, for instance Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

24 Asa J. Davis, “Some Notes on the Life and Times of an Afro-Brazilian Abolitionist of Yoruba Descent,” in I. A. Akinjogbin and G. O. Ekemode, eds., *The Proceedings of the Conference on Yoruba Civilisation Held at the University of Ife, Nigeria, 26th-31st July, 1976*, 464-510.

25 The literature is extensive. Among others, see Penile E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006).

imposed a certain kind of history on slaves and colonial subjects. It is a history of domination, one that attempts to erase the history of slaves and subjects, destroying their archives, and trivializing their subjectivity as agents of change. Exploited and dominated people were presented as primitive, foolish, lazy, and incompetent, creating a damaged image as a justification for domination and exploitation. Irrespective of where they came from in Africa, the generic name of “black” was imposed on them, a way of asking them to forget where they came from and to accept a homogenous debased identity. In rejecting a blanket racial category, the Yoruba opted for a “nation” instead in which they defined themselves in specific terms, and were accepted as such by slaves from other African groups. In this definition, history and memory played a significant role: they had a sense of geographical place of origin, the breakdown of their specific culture, and of course the use of language. As the Yoruba formulated new bonding strategies in the diaspora, they had to plot, as Paul Christopher Johnson shows in his study of Carib religion in New York, “itineraries of spatial memory that at once recover and remold their histories.”²⁶ Even with the minimal material objects they carried with them in support of their religions and worldview, they had memory to support their belief system: the memories of their practices, rites and rituals, myths, tales and proverbs; lyrics and rhythms; architecture and sculptures; and other vectors of religious philosophy.

26 Paul Christopher Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), book description.

In the diaspora, the Yoruba retooled by drawing from mythologies to create their own history, to use myths not only to talk about the past, but to build the consciousness of traditions based on their past. Memory becomes converted into celebration, the carnivalization of mythologies to create bonds in communities, socialize children, and combine plays and recreation with historical reenactments that enable the Yoruba to overcome acts of dehumanization. The experience of exploitation and dehumanization was converted into the memory of rebirth, turning the survival of past freedom and struggles into positive regenerative memory. It is not a case of trying to forget the past, its pain, its brutalities, but of remembering it to regain control, to assert collective identity.

The enslaved Yoruba, cognizant of the value of their past and the link between that past and nationalism, kept their memory alive, identified with Yorubanness, told stories of origin, used their ethnicity to forge an identity. The formation of associations, savings clubs, and mobilization for resistance vividly reveal their groundings in identity. Within the various associations, the people kept memory alive. They discussed their past, and the present conditions of enslavement, racial inequalities, and many more. In the Aponte Rebellion mentioned above, the connections between the past of the people, the formation of associations, and uses to which such associations were put showed a great deal of clarity:

By providing a network of alliances and an institutional structure that offered a limited sense of familiarity for Africans in Cuba, *cabildos* helped their members survive in a society based



STATUE OF ODUDUWA

upon racial oppression. The process by which *cabildos* could address the specific needs of their organization and also serve the common interests of all people of African ancestry became apparent in the Aponte Rebellion. *Cabildo* houses offered security to organize and plan the revolts. The Aponte Rebellion revealed the flexibility and innovative nature of African identity in Cuba. Africans in Cuba could define themselves by simultaneously emphasizing both their Old World ethnicity and their New World racial identity.²⁷

Distorted histories of the enslaved were strategies used to perpetuate slavery and post-slavery racial hierarchies and differences. Memory of Yorubanness and the history emerging from it restores a sense of “correctness,” making what is reconstructed about the past a form of therapy to restore the damage done to souls and bodies. Displacement and relocation had removed the Yoruba from their cultural mainstream to an Anglo-American milieu where assimilation to privilege and power was difficult. They found themselves in situations that were new, strange and different, lacking the memoirs and the blueprints to order their lives. They could fall on their inheritances—their own stories and past. Memory was to ensure that although they were physically perceived as weak and powerless, they would construct themselves as mentally powerful by using the past as a resource. Rebellion is manifested in texts, oral and written, stressing the power of opposition to exploitation and antagonism to racialized power.

27 Ibid., 188.



IBADAN MARKETPLACE

In the exploitative and discriminatory context of the enslaved and free black people, the Yoruba developed what W. E. B. Du Bois characterized as a sense of double consciousness, a bifocal mindset of living—thinking of their Yoruba homeland and adjusting to a new strange land. The Yoruba became part of what Dubois called “a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”²⁸ Yet, they could find true self-consciousness by recourse to Yoruba history.

Double identities emerged to deal with oppression and racism: the identity of being Yoruba on the one hand, and of being a slave, a free black or a hyphenated subject on the other hand. Located far away from their homeland, they

28 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk. Du Bois Writings*. Ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Seabury, 1970), 364.

had to become the recipients of the cultural practices and values of others, becoming a mixed breed, “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”²⁹ To lift the burden of race and marginalization, the Yoruba utilized the memory of being Yoruba—their history, their ancestors, their values—to understand the options and choices they had to live in hostile spaces.

Aroba—the Yoruba word for memory—distinguishes in some ways from *itan*—history telling. *Aroba* is the transformation of *itan* into remembrances, preservation of *itan*, as the use of the past for consciousness of self, others, and community. *Aroba* connects with the multiple dimensions and contradictions of Dubois’s paradigm of double consciousness. To arrive at this consciousness, the *itan* was that of the lived experience and reality of slavery and consciousness, and of its legacies in the continuity of poverty, materialism and racism. Being part Yoruba and part something else (Brazilian, Cuban, or American), they were confronted with the ambiguities of being nowhere and being some place, rendering a state of permanent transition. They were being asked to receive the histories and cultures of others while struggling to retain theirs, to be multicultural, whether temporarily or permanently bilingual.

History, memory, and contemporary living realities have become literary projects. Professor Omoniyi Afolabi, a Yoruba scholar who specializes in Lusophone literature, has written extensively on Afro-Brazilian writings, bringing out how creative scholarship has captured the past and present of people of African descent, working specifi-

29 Ibid.

cally on some Yoruba aspects of the Ile Aye in Bahia.³⁰ In Afolabi's work are the categories of writers who promote cultural heritage (as in the case of Abdias Nascimento³¹) and those who tap into the Orisa tradition to find new meanings. Afolabi, being Yoruba, is able to see in the texts continuity with a past that is being called to the service of the present, the constant re-awakening of culture, and the reinvention of traditions.

Felix Ayoh' Omidire, another Yoruba who followed Afolabi in a similar intellectual trajectory of moving from Ile-Ife to Bahia, has pursued similar themes, uncovering Yorubanness in a wide range of practices, with a stress on language and music. Like Afolabi, he highlights texts with Yoruba centrality, as in the case of Mestre Didi, the son of Iyalorisa Ile Ase Opo Afonja Omidire who has reinterpreted some aspects of Samba music, pushing the argument further that some introductory lines are adaptations of Yoruba ayajo/ogede incantations. What Brazillian listeners will think of as supplication to Catholic saints, Omidire sees as an ofo (incantation) that the Yoruba use to seek the protection of their gods. He invokes and trans-

30 In particular, see Niyi Afolabi, Márcio Barbosa and Esmeralda Ribeiro, eds., *The Afro-Brazilian Mind: Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Literary and Cultural Criticism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); Niyi Afolabi, Márcio Barbosa and Esmeralda Ribeiro, eds., *Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); and Niyi Afolabi, *Afro-Brazilians: Cultural Production in a Racial Democracy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009).

31 See, for instance, *Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, Africans in Brazil: A Pan African Perspective* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992).

lates one example, poetic and incantatory, recited in one piece of Samba music in Portuguese:

I am clothed in the armours of George
That my enemies may have hands, but never
touch me
That my enemies may have legs, but never catch
up with me
That my enemies may have eyes, but never see
me
That, not even in their thoughts may they ever
be able to see me, nor do me harm.³²

The wordings, without the context, will sound like one of those put together by a Juju band in Lagos or Ibadan. But as Omidire explains:

The incantation is part of a song rendered by Brazilian singer Jorge Ben or as an “epigraph” to one of his tracks. It was also used by my compadre Jota Velloso in his 2004 album called “Aboio para um Rhinoceronte” in which I participated with an oriki for Osoosi. The incantation is originally a verse from the chants to the orisa Osoosi in Brazilian Candomblé. Being from such a religious source, it is considered in Brazil as belonging to the public domain, so it can be cited freely.³³

32 Felix Ayoh’ Omidire, “The Yoruba Atlantic Diaspora—Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago,” in Tunde Babawale, Akin Alao, Felix Ayoh’ Omidire and Tony Onwumah, eds., *Teaching and Propagating African and Diaspora History and Culture* (Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, 2009), 321-2.

33 Felix Ayoh’ Omidire, personal communication, Email, April 21, 2012.



Omidire's incantation suggests how older ideas can be adapted through secularization, synthesis and syncretism, continuity and change, rupture and rebirth. Perhaps, in the mouth of a priest able to add herbs, the incantation acquires both magical and medicinal power as Verger has shown, elaborated with further examples by Obafemi Jegede, drawing on the Nigerian-Yoruba data.³⁴

In both the works of Afolabi and Omidire are the tropes of revival and regeneration, two powerful forms of empowering oral traditions that serve as collective memory and the motivation for contemporary literary texts. Indeed, the trope of regeneration that forms the

34 Obafemi Jegede, *Incantations and Herbal Cures in Ifa Divination: Emerging Issues in Indigenous Knowledge* (Ibadan: African Association for the Study of Nigeria, 2010).



central theme in Afolabi's first major book, *The Golden Cage*,³⁵ has a greater application beyond the post-colonial that shapes its interpretations.

REGENERATIVE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Regenerative projects are the conquest of humiliation and tragic histories, displaying how the Yoruba who survived the trauma of the Atlantic slave trade and the racism that followed have become triumphant. Enslaved subjects in the Americas saw in Yoruba mythologies and religions resources to escape degeneration. To escape, they needed to preserve Yoruba inheritances, using various elements as combative instruments.

35 Niyi Afolabi, *The Golden Cage: Regeneration in Lusophone African Literature and Culture* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001).

The inheritances, in various forms and manners defined by descendants of Yoruba people in different eras and locations, bring about the reality of understanding history in multiple ways. First, in terms of the “pastness of the past, but of its presence.”³⁶ The past is invoked to create a meaning for the present. Inheritances become tools to mobilize against power, drawing from them to create combative approaches to organize resistance, shape identity, and invent nationalism. Socialization strategies reinvented associations among the Yoruba, as in the case of *Ogboni* mentioned above, but also of *esusu, aro* and *owe* that enabled considerable interactions in neighborhoods, community building, extensive networking, all of which made it possible to engage in recreations, celebrations, and savings. The basis of success revolved on the memory of past institutions, shared ethnicity, mutual understanding of codes of behavior, and respect for community leaders.

Regeneration is not just about affirming past heritage, but also about new inventions and creativities. The Yoruba in the diaphora have redefined and expanded the boundaries of Yorubanness. In taking Sango and Ogun abroad, they globalized the gods. They are no longer gods localized in fixed towns of Oyo and Ire as mythical origins but redefined in regionalist and Atlantic terms as religions of the Yoruba in Havana and Miami. The cults of Osun

36 This is a phrase by T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 14.

and Yemonja³⁷ have also traveled far and wide doubling as part of the Orisa, and also as the radical politics of using gendered religion to advance feminist and liberational politics.

The reimagining of the gods and goddesses outside of the Yoruba homeland creates many new practices for worshiping, making sacrifices, and communicating with the spiritual world. What the gods and goddesses can do for devotees has become endless, adjusted to meet the demands of the contemporary moment. As enunciated by various Yoruba religious leaders, the Yoruba believe, among others, in the orisa, divination, magic, the use of herbs, a supreme being, ritual songs and dance, and the power of the ancestors.

In Brazil, Candomblé reflects elements of Yoruba religion, expressed in divination, healing, music, spirit possession, and sacrifice. As if in awe of this powerful Afro-Brazilian religion, J. Lorand Matory, in his fine study, praises it for its complexity and beauty, its ability to penetrate rural and urban areas, to meet the needs of both the poor and the rich:

Believers attribute miraculous powers and exemplary flaws to gods known variously as *orixás*, *voduns*, *inquices*, and *caboclos*, depend-

37 On these goddesses, see, among others, Diedre Badejo, *Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power and Femininity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996); Judith Gleason, *Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987); and Lloyd Weaver and Olurunmi Egbelade, *Maternal Divinity, Yemonja Tranquil Sea Turbulent Tides: Eleven Yoruba Tales* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, Inc., 1998).



ing on the Candomble denomination. The adventures, personalities, and kinship relations of these superhuman beings are described in an extensive mythology and body of oracular wisdom, which also serve to explain the personalities and fates of their human worshippers, as well as the worldly relations among those worshippers. Through blood sacrifice and lavish ceremonies of spirit possession, the gods are persuaded to intervene beneficently in the lives of their worshippers and to keep the foes of those worshippers at bay.³⁸

38 J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

As Matory elaborates, it is clear that Candomblé extends itself to the economic and political spheres of networking in small and big ways:

The Candomblé temple, or “house,” also serves the social and economic needs of its class-diverse and largely urban membership. It is usually the primary residence of the chief priest, some of his or her lieutenants, and their wards, as well as a temporary shelter for fugitives from police persecution, domestic crises, and poverty. The temple is also often a conduit of bourgeois largesse, a source of job contacts, an employer in its own right, and a major port of call for politicians.³⁹

In Cuba, Santería is also a continuity of Yoruba religion, sharing a number of elements with Candomblé, and serving as “an important element of cohesion, strength, identification, and pride, and has also become a theoretical and philosophical base for black Cubans in their resistance against slavery and then in their later struggle against racism.”⁴⁰ One powerful commonality is the use of musical instruments to praise the gods and goddesses, with distinctive ensemble developed for such powerful divinities as Esu, Ogun, and Sango. In Cuba, the set of three bata drums (known as *iyá*, *itótele*, and *okónkolo*) are the most visible and powerful symbols of Yoruba religious continuity. Bata, hourglass-shaped and two headed, is one of the most famous drums. Its origins have been associated with

39 Ibid.

40 Umi Vaughan and Carlos Aldama, *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá: Cuba, Diaspora and the Drum* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 4.

the historical Sango, in his role as the *Alaafin* of Oyo, credited to have introduced it to the empire. Batá spread to Cuba, Brazil and other places as part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, becoming “one of the richest cultural legacies that enslaved Yoruba people brought with them into the New World,” with rhythms that “have helped maintain religious and cultural practices shared by millions of people who are spread far and wide.”⁴¹ In a recent collaborative book, Umi Vaughan, a scholar and performer, and Carlos Aldama, a distinguished Bata drummer, point to both continuity and adaptation in the use of this drum:

In Nigeria, musicians stand to play the four drums that are included in the typical batá ensemble. In Cuba, however, just three batá complete the set and the drums are played while seated. The largest and lead drum is called the iyá (mother). The middle-size drum is called the itótele (the one that follows). The smallest drum is called the okónkolo (the stutterer). All together, the tones of the drums recreate language to praise and tease or “call down” the spirits, known as oricha or santos in the Yoruba-derived Afro-Cuban religion called Santería. Whereas in the Oyo area of Yorubaland the batá had saluted only ancestor spirits and Chango himself, king of the drum and dance, in Cuba they were reoriented to address an entire pantheon of oricha.⁴²

The spirit animates the drums and those possessed of the spirit, the *omo Ayan* (the chosen ones) are not only versatile in the creative sense, but manifest spirituality.

41 Ibid., 6.

42 Ibid., 7.

The drummers are also community leaders, and skillful in dance, music and ritual performance. They are not just drummers, but are religiously empowered to lead their communities in morality and ethics. The drummers are part of the social actions that regularly take place, social actions that are integral to the complexity of diaspora communities. Bata and the drummers are intertwined with orisa worship and ancestor veneration, both of which define and unite communities.

Regeneration has continued till today, a strong link between the past and present as in the case of the Oyotunji Village, a semi-autonomous religious community with its own king and chiefs. Founded in the village of Sheldon, Beaufort County in the state of South Carolina in 1970, Oyotunji Village has attempted to recreate Yoruba religions in the context of Yoruba politics and social institutions. Oyotunji rejected the two Western dominant religions of Islam and Christianity, opting instead for the Yoruba Orisa tradition.⁴³ In turning to a Yoruba world religion, they are not returning to an alternative religion, but to what they regard as the central religion. The choice of Yoruba religion rejects the humiliation associated with accepting the alternative religion of Christianity and Islam and the cruel pathology of living in a capitalist-structured environment. Oyotunji is post-slavery in terms of when it was created, but its founders and members are very cognizant of the history of slavery and race relations. Oyotunji has generated impressive scholarly attention, and the cultural space

43 For its self-presentation, see <http://www.oyotunji.org/home.html>.



has been grafted into African religions now taught in

academia in the contemporary period.⁴⁴

If Oyotunji represents the translation of an idea into practice, there are countless oral and written texts that embody the notion of cultural regeneration. Even batá drumming, which I have just mentioned, is now part of secularist music as the drummers create new meanings for performances, while not abandoning the ritual essence when necessary.⁴⁵ Oral and written texts exist in many mythologies, stories, proverbs, songs and dance that subvert hegemonic power, reassert Yorubanness, and celebrate hybridity and creolization. The survival of Yoruba words in Brazil and Cuba, the attempts to sustain Vodun in Haiti, and the search for origins in each of these places reveal how history, mythologies, and language are embodiments of power. Rich Yoruba heritage has been retained and transferred orally, as well as through drums and songs and various cultural practices. Under the context of Islam and Christianity, Oyotunji emerged, just as in previous generations Candomblé and Santería had flourished under hostile conditions. Surviving traditions reveal Yoruba creative imagination, the ability to “substitute elements and adjust[ing] philosophical values to new social situations with great improvisational virtuosity.”⁴⁶ Orisa traditions are now being fully reworked into contemporary life-styles,

44 Kamari Maxine Clarke, *Mapping Yoruba Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.)

45 Debra L. Klein, *Yoruba Bata Goes Global: Artists, Culture Brokers, And Fans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

46 Vaughan and Aldama, *Bata*, 5.

with manuals explaining how to tap into the power of gods and goddesses.⁴⁷

NEW YORUBA DIASPORA CULTURES AND COMPLEX MODERNITY

The Yoruba are *outsiders within* various other cultures in different parts of the world. The narratives of existence have become so diverse, so complex, that mythologies that sustain the Yoruba as *insiders within* cultures such as the Oduduwa origin story may not be sufficient or always useful with the Yoruba who are *outsiders within* cultures where they live in multiracial, multiethnic, and transnational spaces where an individual can proclaim that *other civilizations are of me and mine*.

The historical layers, as the older diaspora has demonstrated, are many. The new Yoruba in the West are recent immigrants, mainly in their first generation. They are transnationalists who talk about their Yoruba homeland and their new adopted homeland. Some present narratives that tend to imply that they carry multiple personalities of transnationalism in one body, sometimes manifesting what Du Bois noted for an earlier generation: “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁴⁸ The reconciliation of the multiple personalities entails a host of different strategies by various individuals, although globalization has provided limitless opportunities to recreate “home” in

47 See, for instance, Philip John Neirmark, *The War of the Orisas: Empowering Your Life Through the Ancient African Religion of Ifa* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

48 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 185.

multiple locations. A new body of work, the most recent by Toyin Falola and others, is emerging on this new generation of immigrants.⁴⁹

As *outsiders within cultures*, they can be regarded as the *Other*, that is, converted into exotic objects of the gaze and as subjects of study who generate conversations about their identity, their spaces, their very being. When they are *Otherized* in the academy, they fall into a division of knowledge that Immanuel Wallerstein has captured:

The fact that the study of Africa was thus limited of course reflected the division of intellectual labour that had been carved out in the late nineteenth century, among whose features was the division of the world into three geographical zones: modern European and European-settler states, which were studied by economists, historians, political scientists, and sociologists; non-Western areas with a long-standing written culture and a preferable so-called “world religion,” which were studied by

49 Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi, eds., *The Human Cost of African Migrations* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi, eds., *African Minorities in the New World* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi, eds., *Trans-Atlantic Migration: The Paradoxes of Exile* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Toyin Falola, Niyi Afolabi and Aderonke A. Adesanya, eds., *Migrations and Creative Expressions in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008); and Emmanuel Yewah and ‘Dimeji Togunde, *Across the Atlantic: African Immigrants in the United States Diaspora* (Champaign, Ill: Common Ground, 2010).



so-called Orientalists; and backward peoples,

which were studied by anthropologists.⁵⁰

The Yoruba have certainly been excessively anthropologized, and equally over-anthologized! Do not rejoice with my powerful statement, which is a critical claim: the unmistakable implication, which is not intended here, is that the anthropologization of the Yoruba is indicative that they we are perhaps the most important of the “backward peoples” that are the favorites of anthropologists!

The economic model that shapes the contemporary world is neo-liberalism, which does not sustain the older Yoruba values of communal sharing, generosity over land and money. New forms of knowledge, notably in computer and technology, have replaced older knowledges. Where knowledge is connected with careers and mobility, age is not necessarily an advantage as technical education may count more.

Neo-liberalism is in turn connected with globalization. Indeed, some will make the argument that the agenda of globalization is to extend neo-liberalism. The Yoruba benefit from the global forces in terms of the ability to migrate, travel, and move their goods and ideas. But they also suffer in terms of the undermining of their language and various aspects of their cultures, as they lose some of them to the spread of Western ones.

NOLLYWOOD

This has become arguably the most powerful contemporary form of spreading Yoruba worldviews, the recu-

50 Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Evolving Role of the African Scholar in African Studies,” *African Studies Review* 26, 3-4, (1983): 155-61.

peration of older values, the propagation of newer ones, and the celebration of multivalent stories. Combining the adept manipulation of Yoruba language with images and scenes that reveal Yoruba landscapes and story lines rich in values grounded in changing Yoruba culture, Nollywood films have traveled very widely, and are found in stores in European and American cities as well across Africa. In one sense, Nollywood unites the Yoruba: the producer and actors are mostly Yoruba; the context is Yoruba; the consumers are mainly Yoruba. Where witches and juju appeared all of a sudden, no one is lost, as the story line can also be Yoruba. And yet in another sense, Nollywood sells Yoruba to the world, tasking them to learn new contexts and meanings, and cautioning them not to impose criticisms on a script governed by a logic that is new or strange to them or by a totally different set of cultural assumptions. When non-Yoruba do their alternative reading of Nollywood, they are compelled to accept the context and text as primordial or modern and affirm the aesthetics of difference. The inability to understand the story line does not lead to the denigration of the culture that produced the text, even if the external analysis is reductionist and misleading when it frames things as “primitivism” or “nativism.”

Nollywood is presenting the idea of a “new Yoruba” in urban and rural locations. Lagos is central to this definition, a place awash with money, with big cars and big houses, where the big men and women spend lavishly. The “new Yoruba” tap into older and newer cultures, local and global ones. A person can move from the village to Lagos and weeks later be on his way to London, but forced back

home by the use of powerful juju obtained from a diviner who lives in a nice house and drives a jeep. The “new Yoruba” does not live in one culture, but is sandwiched in many—three or more cultures.

Nollywood manifests both the degenerative and regenerative sides of culture, and one can find ample examples to support both. Nollywood can project and subvert cultures and power at the same time. Cutting across eras, from the “traditional” to the most recent, many films have portrayed the power and violence of the nation state, the cruelties and brutalities of political leaders, and the failure of state institutions to generate development. Many films have ridiculed excesses, while praising generosity. Evocatory stories have brought to light the dehumanizing habits of the rich and powerful who use human organs to attain power and wealth. Creative stories warn about false living, ridicule abuses, and make people pay the ultimate price for living bad lives and making wrong choices. A bad individual can bring misfortune to an entire family or community. Nollywood indicts the rich and the powerful for being unkind to the poor and powerless. Death is always present, used to portray and punish evil, and to remind everyone about the ultimate end of humanity.

Nollywood has taken Yoruba societies and cultures outside of Nigeria to other parts of Africa and the West. Full of ambiguities, we see the Yoruba in their best moments and in their nakedness, active and passive citizens, and as powerful and traumatized within the large political space of Nigeria. There are authentic Yoruba, full of wise sayings and proverbs, and there is a new generation, often presented as inauthentic because of their inability to speak



STATUE OF OBAFEMI AWOLOWO

flawless Yoruba language and their shameful violation of the cardinal principles associated with quintessential *omoluwabi*. In the characterology, we are moved to pity the inauthentic, as s/he struggles to be assimilated into an ill-defined Western world. The inauthentic is portrayed as degenerate—someone who exhibits a lifestyle of smoking, abuses his/her body with drugs, dresses indecently, that is, exposure of the breasts or chest, and utters careless speech, among other inanities. Bestiality becomes non-Yoruba.

Nollywood hardly subverts cultural hierarchies, always privileging the wisdom of elders, the authority of kings and chiefs, and control over children and women.

Money matters! Nollywood does not always explain how the Yoruba become rich, but frowns at using magic, especially human body parts, for money. While those who do so get rewarded, they ultimately get exposed, indicted and punished. In punishing the get-rich-quick-Yoruba, it superimposes regeneration over degeneration.

Satire is a powerful tool in Nollywood, allowing drama and narrative to demolish the false pretenses of the Nigerian nation state, the corrupting elements of Westernization, and the crudity of modernity. In many films, we are clearly warned to celebrate tradition, to be part of a cultural patrimony that must fall on the past to rescue the destructive path of the present. In Tunde Kelani's *Arugba*, political satire turns into the Osun festival, tapping into the depth and richness of an age-old religious tradition to comment on the secularist politics of the post-1990 era. In blending facts with fiction, fantasy with reality, *Arugba* cleverly formulates a hybrid narratology of power decadence mediated by the restorative power of mythology. In *Arugba* and various others on the theme of power, Nollywood shows unfulfilled dreams, but is careful not to take away hope. As grim as a situation may be, Nollywood often resolves it with hope, as if making a statement that the Yoruba spirit cannot be conquered and cannot be killed. As hope is about to be dashed and everything appears lost, the *Babalawo* will consult Ifa to seek prevention. Sacrifices become regenerative devices to restore order.

Far more than written texts, Nollywood is spreading Yoruba worldviews and culture inside Africa and to other places. No doubt, there is a lot to disagree with in what they spread and the emphasis. For instance, divination and

diviners have acquired all sorts of meanings as miracle workers, magicians, charm makers, evil doers, con men, wise men, saviors, etc. The Quran and Bible have influenced the culture so profoundly. In some movies, when the story writer runs out of ideas to close the story or resolve the conflicts, he or she can bring in an all-wise Pentecostalist priest or an Imam. In the Christian-derived films, the power of Jesus is superior to that of the diviners, and characters are portrayed as evil by drawing from so-called Yoruba culture. Whether it is for good or bad, the films turn to the understanding of older cultures, contemporary realities, and gossips to create new stories.

Whether you like Nollywood or not, it has become certainly one of the most verdant pastures of our Yorubanness: it has shown the capacity to further accentuate and consolidate the global dimensions of the Yoruba Diaspora; the utilization of technology has initiated a new tradition of contemporary literacy and orality, one in which visuality and orality are married for maximum impact.

YORUBA IMMIGRANTS

Just as Nollywood has inserted the Yoruba into the contemporary world of culture, so too have a large number of contemporary Yoruba living in different parts of the West inserting Yoruba into different worlds in different ways. By drawing from Yoruba tradition in the context of a postcolonial world but using ideas derived from modernity, they are creating, on a daily basis, a triangulated reality of the Yoruba. Large numbers of Yoruba have migrated to different parts of the West. Creating families and reproducing themselves, their numbers keep increasing. They have a

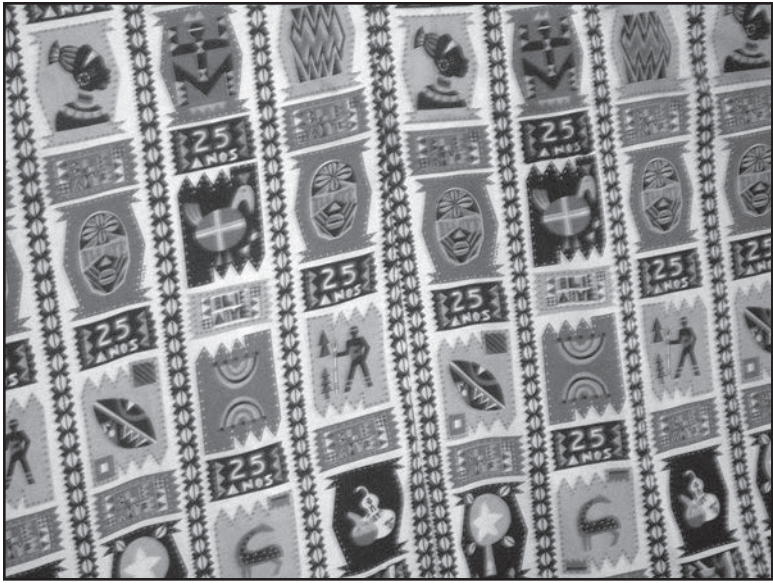
notable presence in such huge cities as London, New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Dallas, and Houston.

In all these cities will be found stores owned and operated by the Yoruba, with Yoruba as the language of communication or any of the Western languages that may be used in the store's location. The stores⁵¹ offer insight into the migration and spread of Yoruba culture as well as the unfolding changes. Established food items such as yam, cassava, corn, palm oil, beans, *gari*, and *elubo* are found side-by-side with newer ones like Quaker oats, custard, bread, tea, corn beef, and sardines. The stores carry Nollywood films, made in Lagos, and also the USA-derived ones, which tend to be imitative of Hollywood and Bollywood. The USA-derived ones tell stories of drug trafficking, a get-rich-fast underground economy that ends in trouble, romantic love, married life and cheating, etc.

There are beauty items, with two coming directly from Nigeria: *ose dudu* and *ori*. *Ose dudu*, labeled as "black soap," has been made for years using a combination of palm kernels, palm oil, and other ingredients. *Ori* is shea butter, and its positive impact on the skin has been popularized even in Western media. Wigs and hair extensions are hung in visible parts of the store, some coming from Nigeria but not a few that are made in China.

Also marketed as beauty items are bleaching materials divided into two: the prohibited ones are hidden while the "toners" are displayed on the shelves. "Whiten-

51 There is ample data to study these stores as well as street trading. For a useful study that looks at another African group, see Paul Stoller, *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).



ing” the skin, an attempt to change from color black to a shade of yellow, red, and sienna, is practiced among a number of Yoruba, notably women. Skin color is related to the conception of beauty and the politics of race. Among some men, light-skinned women christened as *Omo pupa* women tend to attract greater attention than dark-skinned ones (*omo dudu*). Thus, the *omo dudu*, seeking to attract and game competitors, bleaches her skin.

Moreover, over time, black, as a color, has been associated with negativity—“black market,” “black mind,” “black maria,” “black Friday,” etc. Satan is black, and the angels are whites. In racialized societies, the light-skinned are better rewarded with jobs and pay. The dark-skinned are characterized as inferiors. In defining and maintaining white privilege, black skin has been abused and insulted.

To cite just one example where the Yoruba are thrown into a bigger race mix:

Both the United States and Brazil were colonized by a European power that dominated militarily weaker indigenous populations and eventually instituted a system of slavery that relied on Africans. In the Brazilian case, European colonists and their descendants enslaved and imported seven times as many Africans as their North American counterparts. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both countries also received millions of immigrants from Europe as they sought to industrialize. Since then, the light-skinned descendants in the United States and Brazil have come to dominate their darker-skinned compatriots through discriminatory practices that derive from a racial ideology, creating what sociologists call racially stratified societies. Both societies have experimented with affirmative-action policies to promote blacks and members of other disadvantaged groups, beginning in the 1960s in the United States and only recently in Brazil. However, the major similarities between these two large multiracial countries regarding race may end there. For one, the vast majority of persons in the United States with any African origin are categorized as black. In Brazil, large numbers of persons who are classified and identify themselves as white (*branco*) have African ancestors, not to mention the brown (*pardo, moreno*), mixed race (*mestiço, mulato*), and black (*preto, negro*) populations. Unlike in

the United States, race in Brazil refers mostly to skin color or physical appearance rather than to ancestry.⁵²

The Yoruba cannot be isolated from these racialized hierarchies and the ideology of white supremacy, even in Cuba where Fidel Castro attempted to use a socialist ideology to create a race-free society.⁵³ Coping strategies vary, and bleaching may be one of them, although the chemicals used for it, containing a large dose of mercury, are dangerous.⁵⁴ Some may disingenuously argue that bleaching is for looking good, rather than for overcoming the politics of race. The skin, as part of the body, is an identity. The women are consciously defining themselves to others, projecting aesthetics as a politics of representation. The woman who bleaches has a narrative, unspoken, interior, but those who speak about her, in the form of gossip, put forth exterior extraordinary theatrical statements, suggestive of a promiscuous combination of Yoruba with non-Yoruba values.

The body is a zone of politics, whether an individual is conscious of it or not. I am conscious of always wearing only Yoruba attire to work, to teach, and to give lectures in Western institutions. My dress and my ideas become aligned in the politics of culture, the rejection of the cultural arrogance of others. But a body and the dress that

52 Edward E. Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

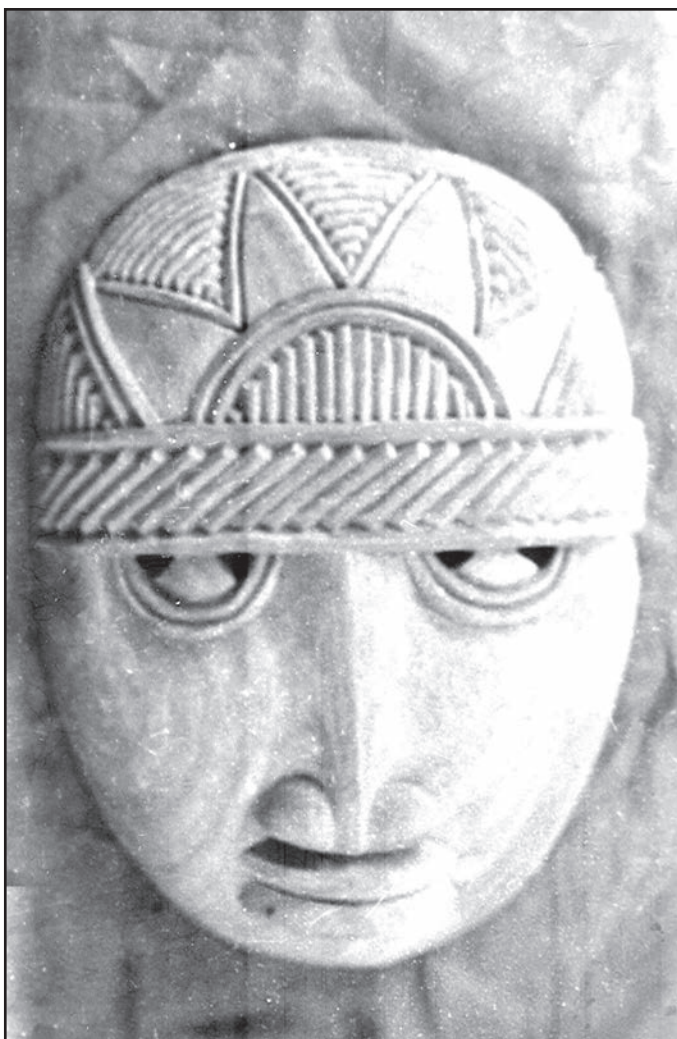
53 On race and politics in Cuba, see Mark O. Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

54 Mercury poisoning can damage the kidneys, and can cause all kinds of mental and neurological symptoms.

adorns it can create identity and cultural warfare, as in the case of veiling by Yoruba Muslims, like others, in Western societies. The Yoruba persona—the language, accent, dress, and food—projects a specific identity but can also unleash both positive and negative comments and conflicts.

The attire on my body is the communication of politics without words. Where it is interpreted as overwhelming and the persona overdetermined, one becomes a symbol of a political identity with a history, a memory. The same person with the same dress at Ibadan, Nigeria would be read differently if located in Austin within an immigrant milieu, where one stirs culture in the direction of assertive politics, disquieting the Western gaze and making it a subject of analysis. A gaze is a probe, an inquisition, even a manifestation of power, all combined to wonder about the subjectivity of an individual, his values, his agenda, his clowning, his defects, and his affirmation of difference. An elegant Yoruba *buba* worn at a formal Western function may be misinterpreted as the superficiality of a persona, so that the person seeks ways to defend or protect himself as he answers questions about his nationality and background. Although black is as a racial category in American society, the Yoruba *buba* makes him a foreign black, a non-American, a recent immigrant. The *buba* leads to an open-ended tale to be told with vigilance.

The members of the second generation, if they wear the *buba* at all, wear it mainly in inconsequential locations, thus making a statement that it lacks the status to command attention in the corporate world or of assimilation in major social functions. Children of immigrants



YORUBA MASK

relate to Yoruba and the culture of their hosts more in the context of assimilation than of cultural assertiveness. The gaze that stares at the Yoruba when they manifest Yorubanness may be interpreted by them as bringing adulation or shame or confusion. For them to accept the assimilation

into Euro-American cultural identity option is to deal with a loss. When a loss is enforced it can provoke anger or shame. When it is a choice, perhaps they are comfortable with it and may be dismissive of the subliminal pressure to belong, to become assimilated, to become “civilized.”

A variety of Yoruba Christianity is spreading, tapping into Yoruba culture to localize the gospel. In these diaspora churches can be found ideas on witchcraft, sorcerers, and the “evil eye.” The Bible acquires the power of magic, divination, and healing. Biblical words can lead to miracles, as psalms are chanted like *ayajo*, *ogede*, and *ofo*. The spread of Yoruba Pentecostalism to the West, as in the case of The Cherubim and Seraphim Church, and most recently of Pastor Adeboye’s Redeem Church is equally a spread of Yoruba culture, manifested in ideas of spiritual power, dreams, trance, and possession by the holy spirit, belief in witchcraft and *omo araiye* (“evil doers”), divination practices grounded in Biblical revelations, and the power of prayer closely akin to that of incantations.⁵⁵

On the part of scholars, they capture the events, the trends, and the history, using the methodologies and rules of their disciplines. In distilling what they do, be they artists or historians, the representation of Yoruba cultures seeks to affirm tradition, change, and modernity. Hybridity has become the core principle of knowledge in presenting Yoruba to non-Yoruba, in mainstreaming

55 See for instance, Toyin Falola, “Introduction,” in Toyin Falola, ed., *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honor of J. D. Y. Peel* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 1-25; and Hermione Harris, *Yoruba in Diaspora: An African Church in London* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

Yoruba in knowledge production, and in using Yoruba as a case study to test various “universal” ideas. Yoruba scholars make general contributions to the understanding of black nationalism, drawing from traditions and powerful mythologies created in a timeless past.

AN IMAGINED FUTURE

The Yoruba have dispersed all over the world, a trend that will not abate as the forces of modernization and globalization inevitably unleash those of travel, movement, migration and relocation for a legion of reasons. A large number has moved out of the Yoruba homeland as exiles and immigrants, many forced and many voluntarily. As they leave, they carry with them elements and ideas of Yoruba culture, so that we can also talk of the migrations of culture. The diaspora, as the preceding sections have explained, belongs to different historical eras, from those of the slave trade to the current one of the transnationalists. Whether from the old or new diaspora, the Yoruba in multiple places have contributed to the ideas and reality of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. Tolerance is a core element in Yoruba character, a point made by David Laitin in his book on the adoption of Islam and Christianity⁵⁶ by the Yoruba and the co-existence of people of different religions in Yorubaland itself. Thus, the Yoruba do not seek cultural insularity, but cultural inclusion. They do not reject globalization, but do not allow the death of their own culture. This affirmation of culture operates at different levels: whether relating to individuals and the

56 David D. Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Change Among the Yoruba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

food they eat and the clothes they wear, or the group in terms of shared religious practices, festivals, and celebrations. Omidire has used the survival of culture to reach the argument that the Yoruba have successfully challenged the imperative of globalization, as their actions and behavior question the hegemonic presentation of the West as universal:

In Cuba and Brazil, as well as in every other part of the Yoruba Atlantic Diaspora, this challenge to “dehegemonize” the cultural globalized scene has been taken up and a vibrant alternative achieved through the proud adoption and expansion of the Yoruba cultural epistemology via Cuban-lucumí, Afro-Brazilian nagô, Afro-Venezuelan and even contemporary indigenous Yoruba-African networks (Orisaworld, Yorubaworld, etc.). These confront, on a daily basis, the canonic values of globalization with options of cultural diversity that offer subjects all over these metropolises another way to live with themselves, live with the others, and interact in a less predatory way with nature and the environment itself.⁵⁷

The dispersal comes with the consequences that I have highlighted, including the elevation of a homeland to the status of a cultural and genetic marker; using the homeland to create in distant places a sense of identity. For this identity to form and be reproduced, it must formulate consciousness and powerful forces of solidarity and collectivity. As migrants—forced or voluntary—struggle in new places, the diaspora becomes an experience of marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation. The experi-

57 Omidire, “The Yoruba Atlantic Diaspora—Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago,” 321.

ence itself leads to survival struggles, which in turn call for strategies to formulate an identity, to create memory, to structure history, and to invent a past, reinvent new traditions, all done with the homeland in mind. Thus, there are connections between the Yoruba at home and abroad, the same way that there are also discontinuities. At the same time, contacts with other cultures and nationalities mean that borrowings will occur, that distances will be created with the original homeland (sometimes now too far to be reachable), and that new sources of labels and identification will emerge.

Yoruba studies have acquired legitimacy in different countries around the world, making the Yoruba one of the best studied groups in Africa. Precolonial Yoruba history has been validated, colonial understanding has been enriched, and postcolonial conditions have been analyzed. The scholarship on the Yoruba is inserted into many of the debates on African studies: what is the best language to teach at an early age, indigenous or foreign? What is the role of scholars and critics in society? Can culture serve as a platform for development? Did colonialism halt modernity? Did colonialism produce alienation? Are the gods gendered enough? Is there a concept of women in Yoruba language, etc? Irrespective of the arguments and their resolutions, the insertion of Yoruba data and the involvement of Yoruba scholars have all cumulatively added up to advancing a global research visibility from Tokyo in Japan and the School of African and Oriental Studies in London to the University of Texas in Austin. Yoruba scholarship is not an appendix to African studies and forms, but in various ways, is a critical component of its center, as in the

case of History, Literature, Sociology, African Languages, and Anthropology. In combination with African studies, Yoruba has contributed to the framing of multiculturalism: how diversity in knowledge advances the quality of education; how focusing on non-Empires minimizes the dominance of Europe in World history; and how focusing on the themes of ethnicity, race, gender and culture expands the frontiers of knowledge.

Studies on the Yoruba diaspora are equally extensive and refined. The language is flourishing. Its values and traditions have supplied the basis for regenerative politics. Yoruba mythologies have led to vibrant literary traditions in the works of many writers such as J. O. Odunjo, D. O. Fagunwa, Ademola Dasylva, Toyin Falola, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, and Femi Osofisan. Yoruba healing systems have been extended forward. Yoruba spirituality is a source of maintaining emotional balance. Memory and regenerative projects have attacked the hegemonic narratives and reality of power and conquest. The scattering of Yoruba people has spread their worldview and belief systems, and consequently, various aspects of culture have survived. Nollywood is powerful, challenging its viewers in multiple places to understand and interpret Yoruba culture, to decode the middle ground between tradition and modernity, to grapple with the paradoxes of change, to question degeneracy, and to contemplate regeneration. Countless literary texts have attributed the woes of the Yoruba to the duplicity among the Yoruba themselves, the role of slavery, and European colonizers. In resolving these woes, emphasis is placed on re-discovering and promoting

Yoruba culture, rebuilding fractured networks, and engendering reconciliation where conflicts exist.

Let me close with some ideas to further empower the Yoruba as well as the studies on us. First, the scholarship on the Yoruba in different parts of the world is yet to be fused, where scholars and works are not fully in dialogue. There are many areas of commonality: the conditions of slavery and post slavery, of colonial conquest and domination, and of migrations. Liberation texts are virtually everywhere, as in overcoming slavery, wars, exploitation, but analysis tends to use specific places or nation states as the context. Hundreds of specific texts exist on various subjects but reflections of a comparative nature are few and far between. In merging the disparate works divided by space and time, cross-cutting themes in comparativist perspectives will yield greater insights and unite the disciplines in more creative ways. Diversity and diaspora are connected, and their multifaceted nature needs to be fully understood such that the Yoruba in various locations may begin a process of creating convergences. Even the contrasts that emerge will create greater understanding of cultural affinities and the sources of difference and departure. The traffic of ideas would be clearer and clarified. To compare and contrast is to understand multiple contexts, and how events are shaped by individuals who need to relate to their own specific milieus.

We always tend to assume that ideas move in one direction: from the Yoruba homeland to other places. On the contrary, ideas also move in the opposite direction. The case of the Brazilian returnees is well known in terms of how they transformed the language, architecture, and

city life in the nineteenth century. Formerly enslaved and modernizing Yoruba agents of Christianity contributed to the spread of Christianity and notions of modernity during the nineteenth century.

Second, rather than using the Yoruba to test so-called universal ideas, we should turn the table on its head: use the Yoruba to universalize scholarship, that is, to turn our own data into theories with universal applications. Thus far, we are more on the receiving end. In a recent essay, Professor Ademola Dasylva has attempted to take the idea of Omoluwabi and translate it into a global project that can be applied in communities in Athens, Georgia in the United States where he presented it to a mostly non-Yoruba audience. If we are able to use the Yoruba data to make theoretical points, we will be extending scholarship to better understand human conditions in universalist terms. Without the ability to formulate larger theories or a unique body of ideas, we will be pushed to the marginalized so-called ethnic or area studies with minimal connections to the mainstreams.

Third, there must be vibrant discussions on change and modernity in the future. Such a discussion is usually an elite project, whereby a small group of individuals construct the future for their own people. Today, the vanguards lack voice and coherence. In the nineteenth century, men such as Rev. Crowther and Samuel Johnson, ahead of their age, prepared the Yoruba for the first half of the twentieth century. They combined the desire for modernity with Yoruba unity, an idea that a politician like Chief Obafemi Awolowo was able to turn into practical and political projects. Modernity is not just about culture,

but also about economic expansion. Wealth has to be created, and then used to expand productivity which in turn will generate more wealth. A cultural group is also a market.

Fourth, the fragmentation of the Yoruba into various states with the Nigerian federation and dispersals in various countries should be treated as a political device to bring progress to the poor and the majority of the people. To prevent the fragmentation from doing damage to a collective sense of identity, cultural projects have to be created and strengthened in ways that will ignore boundaries of states and nations. There should be a Yoruba Day marked all over the world with a set of cultural ideas, perhaps carnivals that borrow from the annual masquerade festivals. Principles can be formulated around the dress to wear, the greeting codes, and the food to eat on that day.

Fifth, the rich cultural resources should be converted to opportunities to promote pilgrimages from other parts of the world to Yorubaland. There are rich and diverse places to meet various interests. The beach- and sea-oriented have their slot, complemented by lagoon routes. The hill- and forest-driven have their places. There are historic sites, some under-developed, such as the location where Sango, the god of thunder, is said to have ended his life; the Yoruba frontier; zones of cultures; religious sites; and many more. More museums have to be created; various customs have to be festivalized, that is, revived and inserted into modern celebratory functions; and artifacts have to be collected and celebrated. Pilgrimages are homecomings, combining tourism with cultural immersion, connections to kinship, a careful blending of the search for authenticity

with aesthetic imagination. Osogbo, with its annualized Osun Festival, becomes the exemplar in this regard. In the process, those in the homeland are able to bond with those outside. In moments of need or crises, there are people at both ends who can be mobilized for action. Resources and energies for development are increased. The ties that bind, as the linkages between Africa and African Americans have shown in the past,⁵⁸ can be revived in greater ideals of larger political networks, intellectual engagements,⁵⁹ and entrepreneurship. The ideals and debate on repatriation from the Americas to Africa,⁶⁰ that even saw Martin Delany choosing Yorubaland as one location, are no more. But still alive are the ideals of connections, pilgrimages, tourism, study-abroad programs, language immersion, and orisa networks, all of which can be promoted to build strong bridges and fuel cultural and economic development.

Sixth, the Yoruba within Nigeria have to return to the idea of cultural competition, such as those in the 1950s and 1960s in which I participated in when schools competed for awards in drama, language, literary creations

58 A valuable work is Ronald W., Walters, *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993).

59 Of reference here is the older conversation on Negritude that was trans-Atlantic in natures. See Carlos Moore, Tanya R. Sanders and Shawna Moore, eds., *African Presence in the Americas* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995).

60 Robert Johnson, Jr., *Returning Home: A Century of African-American Repatriation* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005).

and many more. The competitions engendered a strong ability to read and use the Yoruba language, to promote Yoruba values, and to socialize in the young a respect for the values of *omoluwabi*. The *omoluwabi* concept raises the issue of the responsibility and accountability of leadership, one that should have a consciousness of a tomorrow, which though the son of today, yet is greater than yesterday. *Jegudujera*, *ajenigbolagbe* among our people may destroy themselves along with us. The potent force of “Esu laalu, ogiri oko” as warning against *ibaje* is a trope for us to utilize the classrooms and layers of dialogue.

Today, the Yoruba world is dominated by the young, our future. But the young are decreasingly active in Yoruba culture, far more exposed to Western culture, disconnecting their intellectual interest from indigenous ideas. Yoruba history and culture must be integrated into major studies irrespective of the future careers of students. Play is politics when it translates words and acting into knowledge: self knowledge, as the students are further embedded and inserted into their own environment, turning aesthetics into culture. The process of cultural immersion advances the project of cultural reproduction, enabling playful and critical engagement with stories, legends, mythologies, proverbs, and rituals to affirm the value of the past and to minimize the burden of modernity. Expressions of cultural identity cannot be neutral in the context of globalization and Western cultural hegemony. Neither can they be neutral in the context of a growing generation of parents in cities who are disconnected from reproducing the Yoruba language and its values. Cultural competitions can close the gap between generations (as youth engage with adults

as audience) and also between creativity, thought, and fragmented human lives. They can bring back forgotten voices of the past, thereby raising consciousness about the past and the present. We will certainly discover excellence in youth and creativity in ways that will advance our lives and thoughts.

We have to culturalize ourselves before we can culturalize others. The past must always have a useful function. Places that the Yoruba call “home” have expanded far beyond the geographic space of southwestern Nigeria. Those within the original homeland who invented the *Isese* (original traditions) have to find lasting values in them. Those “abroad” have to find value in their hybridity, combining Yoruba with elements of the culture where they live. All have to find values in continuity and change, developing the techniques to accept contradictions and ambiguities in the evolution of new cultures, popular cultures, and youth behavior. Changes will come, but locality remains as well. Modernist theories that older traditions and religions will just fade away have been proven wrong by the resilience of culture. Globalization theories that predicted the disappearance of the local are not correct either. Cultures and ethnicities remain powerful. Nationalism has been formulated around the two of them. It is how people understand themselves and their heritage that shapes how they understand others.

Our vision of modernity, as Yoruba, must remain expansive, accommodating, receptive to change, and progressive. As those at home and abroad see themselves in the framework of a “nation,” they should continue to learn from one another, interact on the basis of common

interest, share ideas to promote development and innovations, and minimize divisive conflicts, while promoting competition. The Yoruba live within national, regional, continental, and global universes, as members of diverse spaces: trans-ethnic, trans-national, trans-cultural, even trans-racial. All these spaces have to be managed, but they also have to be crossed to benefit one another, to promote peace, and to minimize conflicts.

Let me close by directing the final remarks to the Atlantic Yoruba irrespective of where they live. Tokunbo is Yoruba, whether she stays put in the land across the ocean where she is born or she returns home! And when Tokunbo becomes Toks, Tosin is Tosyne and Toyin becomes Toyen, we do forgive the transgressions, bearing in mind that *omi leniyan, oruko to ba wu ni la je lehin odi*. Surely, in the spirit of tolerance, we must live by it. However, as you conduct the transgressions, bear the following in mind:

- i. Language. Frantz Fanon's view on the phenomenon of language is apt, I think, in relation to the efforts by the Yoruba in the diaspora to cling to their culture. For sure, they were assimilated into the host culture in the Americas. But they inserted themselves, through their various orisa, into the controlling religious syntax, a strategy that has become very effective in allowing for a multitude of cultural events and religious ceremonies.
- ii. Still on language, cultural sustenance by keeping the Yoruba language alive, especially at home and abroad, is crucial. The tribute to J. E. Odunjo is important: a man whose name has become, for many in my generation, synonymous with culture,

although we probably were not that discerning at that time. Our literature should flourish through an invigorated Yoruba language. Nollywood has taken the lead here. There may come a day when many colleges in the West are sufficiently convinced about the preeminence of Yoruba culture to make the study of Yoruba language a required or even an elective course. That's when the potential of tourism will be fulfilled: when Western scholars are enthused enough about Yoruba that they do not consider themselves fulfilled until they have visited Oyo Ile, Osogbo, Idanre, and several other potential tourist destinations.

- iii. An essential aspect of culture is its adaptability. However, for the Yoruba in the diaspora, names are an important marker: of ancestry and locality. Names are among the major ways in which the Yoruba will essentialize themselves in the diaspora. For sure, "Oruko to ba wuni la je lehin odi."⁶¹ But that is probably more applicable to those who are on a sojourn, *ajo*, who are intent on returning home to enjoy the labor of their haul as sojourners. The Yoruba in the diaspora have a responsibility to contribute to world civilization by holding on to their Yorubanness, which we first confront through their names. In the U.S. in particular, this is what has made it easy for us to easily identify with other ethnic-Americans. Their names are a perpetual reminder of their Jewishness, their Ital-

61 Translation: one can be any name outside of his place of his birth.

ianess, Polishness, etc. In the age of Facebook, we should impress on our wards to respect themselves by asserting their individuality. And what better way to do that than to learn to write Oluwajuyigbe properly, rather than the Facebook gibberish that seems to have become a fad.

We must rework the relationships between the Yoruba *insiders within culture* and the Yoruba *outsiders within cultures* so that we can merge our interests in all the locations, all the centers, and all the margins in order to create a genuine dialogue in the promotion of Yoruba humanity and progress.

Oro mi si yin ko lopin. Ire gbendu !

