

Memory and Belonging in Contemporary Yoruba Society: Understanding Youth Cultural Citizenship in a Global Age

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Abstract

Yoruba exceptionalism, in terms of culture, is a well-known phenomenon. It has defined the historical development of the group since ancient times. This is, however, under severe pressure as the intersections of culture, market and globalization have redirected the meaning of being a Yoruba in different directions. The cultural citizenship of the average Yoruba person has experienced great transitions and change following the development of popular alternatives regarded as alien to Yoruba cultural values and orientations. This is taken as a deep reaction to the changes in the locus of production, changes in consumption, telecommunications, and rapid transportation systems. What are those cultural aspects that define the Yoruba and how have these been modified over time? This paper attempts a reconstruction of the route towards a reconfiguration of what it means to have a Yoruba identity in the global age.

Introduction

To note the changes that have taken place among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria in

contemporary times is to accept the remarkable forces unleashed by globalisation and modernity on an indigenous group. The cross-cultural developments that ensued after first, after colonisation and later, globalisation bred a new generation of Yoruba. Samuel Johnson had described the subsisting Yoruba culture and values in superlative terms when he proclaimed: "Children were more dutiful to their parents, while inferiors were respectful to their superiors in age or position. Yoruba as a whole are sociable, polite, and proverbially hospitable." (Johnson 1921, 98) The Yoruba race had prided itself as the custodian of ancient cultures, values, and civilization. They claimed a pride of rich patrimony, 'a pride which is accounted for by their own firm commitment to reconcile their culture and traditions with the inevitable influences of modernization through the medium of literacy, oral and scripted creativity, the new medium of film, and inevitably, the cyberspace revolution that continues to generate, alarmingly, a new "literacy." (Smith, 2017:71) These precious values have passed down from generation to generation, albeit in attenuated and mutated forms. This is because, with the acceptance of Christianity and Western education from the nineteenth century, the Yoruba became transformed with the growth of a new elite. (Ajayi, 1965; Falola and Akinyemi, 2016:3) Even then, a modernity that came with colonial or Western values was unable to erode indigenous language, culture, and memory totally. The people held on tenaciously to their cultural values until the twilight of the twentieth century.

The Yoruba: Foundations of a Society

The formation of centralised states became one of the earliest features of Yoruba society. It would be recalled that after the emergence of Oduduwa, the eponymous ancestor of the Yoruba, the dispersal of his

descendants from Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba race occurred. This has continued to contribute to the affinity that has characterised the relationships among Yoruba Obas and peoples. A valedictory meeting had taken place at Ita-Ajero where Obalufon bequeathed each prince with a share of the royal heritage and paraphernalia such as *Ade ide* (bronze crown), *Opa opaga* (staff of office), *irukere akun* (a cow tail with embroidered bead handle) before each person departed for his territory. Those who left were sons or grandsons of Oduduwa. Today, the Yoruba are spread over a vast area that now constitutes present Southwest Nigeria. They are also found in other countries of West Africa, notably in Sierra Leone, Togo, and the Gambia. Large concentrations of Yoruba people are also found in Cuba, the West Indies, and Brazil. As a distinct group, they have a unique history, language, and culture. This has established a common bond among the people. The people's capacity to co-exist to advance and defend their mutual interests is never in doubt. (Adesina, 2016)

There are ethical behaviours among the Yoruba that helped develop or reinforce moral practices in society. There are a series of taboos and legends that are used in creating moral principles that guide everyday behaviour among the Yoruba. This has served over time as effective and efficient tools of governance, administration, and social relations among the group. Dauda (2016: 120) has amplified "...The political culture of the people includes an unwritten constitutional monarchy, hierarchy, age difference (indeed, elders require that children be seen and not heard) ..." He adds further, "At home and in the workplace, and in any relationship, there are codes of behavior for everyone (children, youths, and adults..." Consequently, to reinforce compliance, Yoruba have names that describe all ethical behaviours: *olooto*, the truthful; *olododo*, the upright or one with integrity; *onirele*, the humble or

modest...and *omoluwabi*, the one of high integrity and probity or the paragon of all ethical behaviour. There are also names for all unethical behaviors: *oniro*, or *opuro*, the liar ... (Dauda 2016: 121). Thus, as a social group with common cultural traditions, the Yoruba were well known to have survived by placing much premium on character, integrity, and ethics.

Yorubaland in the Age of Globalization

The quickened pace of globalization has wrought significant changes in the world with severe implications for cultures and societies across the globe. Culture in this work is taken to mean "a precipitate of history and a way of life carried along by a group of people" (Agai, 2015).

In the twilight of the twentieth century and during much of the twenty-first century, the older generation of Yoruba men and women considered the present generation of Yoruba youths insufficiently dedicated to projecting Yoruba culture and identity. The liberalising tendencies of the present have succeeded in changing the consciousness and characters of the current generation of Yoruba. The older generation had neither foreseen this crisis nor fashioned out the appropriate responses to them. Thus, any study of contemporary Yoruba society must begin with the question: What does it mean to be Yoruba today? This poser takes us towards a more self-conscious identity as a people. This becomes even more important when (Oladele, 2016) it is realised that the Yoruba society and outlook today are radically different from the way Yoruba ancestors conceived it several hundred years ago.

The Yoruba people constitute one of the most educated and advanced groups in sub-Saharan Africa. This was because they were beneficiaries of various educational schemes.

According to Afolayan (2016:115) "...from womb to tomb, the Yoruba person is exposed to one form of education

or another. It is for this purpose that even preschool education is ingrained into the social functioning of the Yoruba child.”

The modes of sociality have changed over time. Sociality can be described as a survival response to evolutionary pressures. How has Yorubaland evolved? The concentration and energies of many people living together led to changes in society. External influences and pressure gave a stimulus to diverse ways of seeing and doing things. This encouraged a transformation of society from below.

Specifically, since the mid-1980s and the 1990s, a new kind of consciousness has defined existence in the developing world in general and Yorubaland in particular. The whole notion of Yoruba identity has undergone fundamental re-assessment. The move towards a self-consciously defined identity in the contemporary period has been affected by a variety of historical developments. These include but are by no means restricted to the following (The Nation: the future aspirations of Yoruba youths; Nigeria’s political circumstances; the power equation and National Question in Nigeria; the country’s economic situation; consumption patterns; and the ever-rising expectations of the younger generation. The challenges we face are, therefore legion, and they have to do with not only where we are coming from but also where we are headed as a people. To understand this, we must analyse where we are today. It is generally believed among the young Yorubas that to be a true Yoruba man or woman in the real sense of the word is now old-fashioned. To this group, this is a feature that should only be celebrated and praised in creative or cultural constructions. The rise of this new group of Yoruba men and women and boys and girls who have tried to create their understanding of the self, far away from the traditions of the Yoruba people is, therefore, a reality to be recognised understood and negotiated. (Oladele, 2016)

The Yoruba Youth and a New World Order

The Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria remains culturally, socially, strategically, linguistically, and commercially intertwined although politics and sub-ethnic identities and solidarities have sometimes complicated this relationship. Nevertheless, the region and its people hold substantial promise for posterity and future well-being. However, the complex nature of contemporary Yoruba society has followed an evolutionary pattern that is extremely difficult to decipher.

Youths became victims of the economic downturn that began in the 1980s and has subsisted until now. The adjustment mechanisms suggested by both the IMF and World Bank have not helped matters. The age of globalisation has further deepened the problems of youths. Africa ranks as the continent with approximately 50 percent of its population falling within the youth bracket between 18 and 35 years. They face enormous challenges and difficulties in realising their dreams.

Nevertheless, they have been able to challenge the traditional status quo that had put them down over time. (Nkwi 2015: 83) This had been foreseen by I. A. Akinjogbin (2002), the foremost Yoruba historian of the 20th century had prepared us for the changes experienced by any cultural group. He affirmed: “Culture is not static. It is dynamic. Certain items are no longer useful at a particular period in a particular culture can be discarded and are usually discarded in favour of new items that would suit the circumstances of the time.” (Akinjogbin, 2002:1) In a situation like this, how does one begin to negotiate Yorubanness? That is a mindset that has become contradictory. The mentality of the elders is that as a Yoruba, you must behave like the Yoruba as described in the J.F. Odunjo Yoruba classics. But the present generation sees that as archaic and

antediluvian. The younger generation wants to be chic and very modern. How we got here and where are headed are two issues that have continued to fascinate contemporary Yoruba society.

Education, Westernisation, and Yoruba

The Yoruba are the proud inheritors of high values, beliefs, and perspectives. The group arrived in the modern world with its heads held high. With the British defeat of the Yoruba states, kingdoms, and empires in the nineteenth century, western structures and educational development became the signposts of the new world. Since then, developments in Yorubaland became difficult to be isolated from contemporary developments in the world. In every sphere, Yoruba men and women have done quite well in spite of great odds. They have been recognised as excellent academics, political leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, activists, and a host of other things. They have achieved so much, and they have continued to be celebrated. Much as the group could count its triumphs, it can also chronicle its trials, travails, and tribulations. The people's problems are multidimensional and its traducers legion.

Today's circumstances could not have been less favourable for the Yoruba race. Yoruba culture is diluted, and the schools have decayed. Also, society is facing a less confident future due to its compromised ideals and extremely low self-esteem. There is today in Yorubaland a revolution of sorts. It is a revolution that can be referred to as a "revolution of rising expectations." Failure to understand this revolution may lead to a more sinister and obstreperous revolution that may consume all of us. We must now be ready to identify the sources and context of this "revolution of rising expectations." That defines the inter-generational tension currently being witnessed and which has created a sense of confusion. There is a 'crisis of youth' in Yorubaland.

Access to employment, education, and quality of life have become quite worrisome in recent times. Secondary school is almost destroyed. The government is the more significant culprit here. Reduced funding and useless curriculum which have proved seriously inadequate are shoved down throats of the present generation of students. Unfortunately, these schools have played only a limited constructive part in the societal search for progress. The performance charts from WAEC and NECO in recent times have been disappointing. In 2014, Oyo State had the worst WAEC result in the Southwest. It was 24th out of the 36 states and the FCT. With only 19% passing with five credits and above- with English and Maths, 77,672 sat for the exam and only 14, 574 passed. (IB Pulse, 2014) We should note that the states that numbered 1 to 6 were in the East and the South-South: Anambra (66%); Abia (59%); Edo (58%); Bayelsa (53%) and Rivers (53%). Oyo state did not even meet the national average, which was 31.29%. A commentator, perhaps a direct reference to the rusted roofs in Ibadan derisively described the situation as "rusted roofs, rusted brains."

In 2016, Osun State was ranked 29th among the 36 states and the FCT in the 2016 result released by WAEC – the least ranked state in the southern part of the country. (Oluwole, 2016) With the massive failure rate in the WAEC, the region is showing signs of intellectual fatigue and civilizational collapse. Ekiti State's performance in NECO in 2016 succeeded in taking away the region's reproach. It emerged tops in the 2016 June/July National Examination Council (NECO) Exams (Premium Times, 2016). Ekiti led all the 36 states and FCT in performance. It was followed by Edo State, while Abia and Kogi states were the joint third (NTA News, 2016). Even then, what the group should aim for is a kind of consistency that restores the leadership and

competitiveness of the Southwest in the nation.

Once upon a time, schools in Yorubaland had served as incubators of great ideas, debates, and values. They were spaces and sites of knowledge production, acquisition, transmission, and application. Those were the days when we imagined our ideals and lived up to them. We were vested with the ability to discern creative intelligence, to understand indigenous cosmologies, culture, and mysticism. Unfortunately, Yoruba children are being raised in an environment alien to the African ideas about religion, otherness, and enduring values. Schools are even now proud to advertise here that they are using a British curriculum.

These institutions must be transformed to respond to developmental needs, and this must be rooted in the traditional knowledge and value systems of the people. The curriculum must become an integral vehicle of social transition. Many of our children have now drifted away from their traditional values of collaborative community responsibility. This is a severe ideological crisis. There has to be curriculum transformation; people need to know who they are in terms of their history and cultural values. We must heighten their awareness of their rights and responsibilities.

The Home and Yoruba Culture

The home has also been implicated in the crisis of youth in twenty-first century Yorubaland. It is imperative to have a responsive home. Society must once again begin to have socially responsible parents who are ready to teach discipline, work ethics, and a sense of mission. Nowadays, there are several practices regarded as a violation of liberty and autonomy. Specific values that were at one point seen as useful are now considered retrogressive. A boy prostrating or girl kneeling in greeting is considered very crude. Many people do not know that in the acts of showing

deference are a more nuanced language and message- a sense of duty. By our acts of commission or omission, we have denied our children of that valuable practice and its import. Children no longer do house chores. The parents do everything. We have over-indulged our children. We speak English to them at home. They do not sweep the house before leaving for school. They also watch TV late into the night. We have lost control over the children. They are our treasure. But they have also indirectly become our bosses. We are therefore gradually creating just like contemporary Chinese Society, "Little Ceasers" whose conduct and attitude may prove counter-productive in the nearest future.

The essence and requirements of contemporary Yoruba society have undergone fundamental change. This is an age when every country is part of the global village. Another relevant question is how much have we gained or lost in being a member of this village? We have increased in knowledge, wisdom, and sophistication, but it is evident that while we have consumed the global, we have either jettisoned or distorted the local. Our fundamental values shaped by centuries of history and civilization have gradually lost steam. The Yoruba have always constructed their identity in the context of inter-group relations within the region known as Yorubaland, as well as within the more significant geographical areas of modern Nigeria. (Falola and Genova, 2006: xxvi) Thus, when at the most defining moment of potential structural change envisioned by the central government, the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria would stand up to protect their natural, inalienable and sacred rights over rights of ownership of land and forest resources, their language and culture, freedom of speech, expression, and association. That is gradually giving way to a new reality.

Let us interface the past and the present. We grew up singing: *Omo tomoya*

loju osi ni o tomo pa. Iya tojiya po lori re re, baba tojiya po lorire, omo tomoya re loju o. Osi ni o tomo na pa. (that is, you must never disobey your mother. There are dire consequences for doing so). That was enough in the past to send terror into the hearts of the young. Today, churches and mosques of the Pentecostal hue are becoming extremely popular and more socially relevant than the home and family. The prosperity gospel of today is independent of social mores. They are quick to dismiss parental guidance as ancestral.

Others have, therefore elevated certain expectations as being the route to great success. For instance, if you have 'Luke 6. 38', then you can scoff at any other exhortation: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Adverse conditions have pushed multitudes of church and mosque-goers into the hands of both good and false prophets where they are promised instant miracles - better than what parents and governments can do. Many of these places of worship have told their worshippers that in return for huge or selfless donations they will be rewarded materially, gain promotion or get cured of troublesome ailments. If you tell people to sow to prosper or make progress, they begin to redefine their places and roles in society. Now Charismatic pastors and Imams cannot be disapproved. They have become dominant socially, economically, and politically. The rise of Pentecostalism in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with the growth of the new economics and politics. They have all given rise to a new generation of Yoruba. They see the world differently.

We live in a time subjected to social tensions, poverty, ill-will, and disorientation where the economy is in free fall, and there is acute youth employment. The contemporary history of the Yoruba is

suffused with great dilemma and challenges. The Yoruba now appear to be victims of the crisis of nationhood and crisis of self-immolation. Existence in this land has left them with a troubling duality. On one hand, there are those who were weaned on what it means to be Yoruba and who spoke about it with pride; on the other hand, are those who either deny or repudiate the sentimental attachment to the values of the past. The effects of these two are quite devastating. Let us animate the discussion with a real-life scenario:

Scenario

On July 16, 2016 at a Yoruba community, something dastardly happened. Oba Yushau Goriola Oseni, the Oniba of Ibaland was kidnapped, his wife shot and his guard killed. The kidnap of the Oniba of Iba, Oba Goriola Oseni in July 2016 is symptomatic of the civilizational collapse that has now surfaced in Yorubaland. The Lagos State Governor, Akinwunmi Ambode in a statement read on his behalf by the Commissioner for Justice and Attorney-General, Mr. Adeniji Kazeem insisted that the kidnap of a monarch in Yorubaland was a sacrilege: "Permit me to state that the kidnap of an Oba in Yorubaland is a sacrilege and a complete desecration of the cultural values of the Yoruba people that must not go unpunished." (Ekene-Okoro, 2016: 4-5) Members of the group had been into bunkering before the government forced a stop to it. They had no business with sedate means of livelihood. Explaining why their leader Micah did not go for the operation with them, Ododomu claimed it was because he "had a babe with him at home." (Ekene-Okoro, 2016: 4-5) A common felon, who ordered a king to be kidnapped, could not be bothered because he was with a woman! But how could the governor say that when those who should teach them moral values are themselves ignorant of what they should teach the children? How would the younger generation know, transmit and transfer certain values to their friends,

neighbours, and contemporaries from other ethnic groups when they do not understand? The suspects in the Oniba case, Toba Forejo, and Isaiah Ododomu had claimed that nine of them had gone to kidnap the monarch. The others were: Micah, Igodo, Mighty, Folly, Sam. How many of those who collected N15.1 million ransom have heard of the J.F. Odunjo poem (Ise loogun Ise – See below) remonstrating with the youth to follow the path of hard work?

Classic Yoruba by J.F. Odunjo with English translation (Opinions.NG, 2017)
Ise l'ogun ise (Work is the antidote for poverty)

Mura s'ise ore mi (Work hard, my friend)

Ise la fi n'deni giga (Work/Labour is the major tool for elevation)

Bi a ko ba reni feyin ti (If we do not have anyone to lean on)

Bi ole la'nri (We appear indolent)

Bi a ko ba reni gbekele (If we do not have anyone to support us)

A tera mo'se eni (We simply work harder)

Iya re le lowo lowo (Your mother might be rich)

Baba re le lesin lekan (Your father may have a stable full of horses)

Bi o ba gbo'ju lewon (If you rely on them)

O te tan ni mo so fun o (You are close to shame and disgrace, I tell you)

Ohun ti a ko ba ji'ya fun (Whatever one does not work hard to earn)

Se kii le pe lowo (Usually does not last)

Ohun ti a ba fara sise fun (Whatever gain one seriously labours for)

Nii pe lowo eni (Usually lasts with one)

Apa lara (Your arm is kin)

Egunpa niyekan (The elbow is a sibling)

B'aye ba n'fe o loni (If the world loves you today)

Bi o ba lowo lowo (If you have money)

Aye a ma fe o lola (The world will still love you tomorrow)

Tabi ki o wa ni'po atata (Or if you are in a prestigious position)

Aye a ma ye o si terinterin (The world will celebrate you with smiles)

Je k'o de'ni tin rago (Wait till you become poor)

Aye a ma yinmu si o (The world will grimace at you)

Eko si'nso ni d'oga (Education also elevates one to higher positions)

Mura ki o ko dara dara (Ensure that you acquire it well)

Bi o si r'opo eniyan (And if you see a lot of people)

Ti won f'eko s'erin rinrin (Making mockery of education with laughter)

Dakun ma f'ara we won (Please do not emulate or keep their company)

Iya n'bo fun'omo ti ko gbon (Suffering beckons for the unwise child)

Ekun n'be fun'omo to nsa kiri (Tears are due for the truant child)

Ma f'owuro sere ore mi (Do not toy with your early years)

Mura si'se ojo'nlo (Work hard; time waits for no one)

For the average Yoruba Youth now, this poem has become anachronistic, because they feel education has not elevated them. The reality for them, like other youths in Nigeria, is unemployment after graduation.

As a people, therefore, the Yoruba appeared to have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. But for the sake of their progeny, there is common sense in creating a discussion on how to reinvent the Southwest. Other valid questions come to mind when thinking of the Nigerian problem. When and how should the country and its people turn its natural and cultural endowments into social institutions that will ennoble this country and give her a sense of direction? In other words, how do we use our diversity to create a variety of opportunities that would lead to sustainable partnerships? We should always ruminate over these questions, most notably when one realizes that we have achieved little in inter-cultural communications even among our people. Several Nigerians suffer from a congenital lack of historical understanding. A multiplicity of resources- human and

material- abound in the Southwest that could make the land a desirable and happy one. Many of the customs and social practices have changed due to Christianity, Islam, Modernization, and Globalization. (Falola and Akinyemi, 2017:22)

Yoruba Identity and the Last Frontier

Ever since the days of the Yoruba language being tagged as vernacular and pupils punished for speaking it in the school premises, our best and brightest no longer know what it means to be Yoruba. But so are the countless masses of no names. What does it mean to be Yoruba today? Our young people are no longer able to make a sentence in Yoruba. Many parents even speak Yoruba to their children, and they are only able to respond in English. Worse still, it is now seen as class war. When your mechanic or *gari* seller speaks ‘toxic’ English to their children, and you advise them to stop it and allow the children to understand and talk in Yoruba, you have become an enemy. An enemy that allows his children to speak and correspond in English but wants to keep others down. The force of change requires new competencies in government, academia, and society. There must be an end to extreme partisanship to share ideas and use valuable workforce. The Yoruba people should be more creative in developing the Southwest of Nigeria through the principle of economic integration and the re-invention of culture.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the present generation of Yoruba youths has lost touch with deep Yoruba values, language, and culture. They have all succumbed to linguistic and cultural imperialism at its most sublime. But most of these are self-imposed. After years of talking, the focus must now shift to action. Despite the challenges faced by the region and its people, there are opportunities and

possibilities in the Southwest. The present and future cannot be settled by mere hope but “out of action and by positive choices we make.” (Ogunfunwa, 2016:44) It is, therefore, easy to agree with the view opined in *The Guardian* (2016) that “much still needs to be done to lay the foundation for economic recovery, sustainable long-term economic growth, and inclusive prosperity.”

Vision is what makes a difference to life. How do we begin to understand ourselves and find solutions to the questions that confront us as a people? How do we salvage indigenous cultures and values, and respectfully inscribe and re-inscribe them into contemporary Yoruba society? What has to be done? This must be understood at two levels: the level of ideas; and, the level of action. There now must be a Yoruba Grand Strategy that understands the dynamics of the world we occupy. We now need to be more creative in times of adversity. The period of adjustment should be the incubator of ideas. For instance, we need to make our agriculture “productive and profitable in the shortest possible time.”(Osuji, 2016:48)

It is appropriate to borrow some views from that seasoned scholar, Ayi Kwei Armah (2016). In his work entitled, *The Eloquence of the Scribes*, he inferred that society could move forward through “the retrieval of unhindered connections with the society’s past, the locus of positive values required for continued self-realization, one that would liberate the genius of creation in the African mind... [coming] into contact with, our own best spirits.”(Armah, 2016:7) This must become a generation that should be noted for its attempt to rehabilitate indigenous values and cultural traditions.

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