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## The Odùduwà Myth and the Farce of Yorùbá Unity

### Introduction

The Yorùbá people with a population of about twenty-five million, constitute one of the largest single ethnic groups in Saharan Africa. They are spread across four West African countries, Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and Sierra Leone, the largest



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

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

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

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

they migrated from Wadai and had nothing to do with, beyond all these, and greater than any other factor, one indisputable fact is the cultural homogeneity of all Yorùbá subgroups as seen in the relative similarity of their Yorùbá language and culture.

It would seem that the Odùduwà factor was not a dominant issue in the history and politics of the Yorùbá until the late 1940s when it was revived or perhaps contrived. A number of factors could account for this development. Beginning from 1821, Yorùbáland was engulfed in fratricidal wars that lasted till the end of the century. The last of them were the wars between the alliance of Èkìtì, Ìmò and Ìpò, on one hand, and the almighty Ibadan on the other. Obviously fought to throw off the yoke of Ibadan domination, the fighting provided the needed excuse for the British incursion into the interior of Yorùbáland. Beyond the polarisation of Yorùbáland into military camps, the hostility which the war generated profoundly affected interactions among the Yorùbá states as well as their unity. Even before the outbreak of the civil wars,





Council of Elders (Y.C.E), otherwise known as



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

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

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been a continual source of friction between the two traditional rulers and by extension their subjects

As might be expected antagonisms among the Yorùbá have produced a wide range of results of diverse kinds. It has generated court cases in some instances. This was the

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characterised by violence and the destruction of lives and property as witnessed in the

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Ironically, the traditional elite who should know better are part of this rot. Thus

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

The preoccupation of the elite, both traditional and modern

One important consequence of disunity in Yorùbáland has been the inability of the Yorùbá to present a common front on national issues, as groups claiming to be speaking for the Yorùbá sing discordant tunes. The issue of presenting a common agenda at the National Political Reforms Conference held in 2005 is a case in point. Even when it a

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

Notes

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