

YORUBA CULTURE

LOCATION

The people in Nigeria belong to more than two hundred different ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs and traditions. One of the largest groups are the Yoruba. Some 10-20 million Yoruba live in Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo, and consist of about 25 separate communities. In Nigeria they mostly live in the tropical forests and in the Western High Plains. Their living environment is largely covered with savanna parkland and grasslands.

HISTORY

Archeological evidence shows us that the Yoruba have lived in here since prehistoric times. The Yoruba have been the most dominant group in this region of Africa for centuries. The eighteenth century was a particularly difficult one for them; there were civil wars with neighbors and the slave trade destroyed much of the richness of Yoruba society.

Things only got worse for the Yoruba after the civil wars and the slave trade. The British colonized the Yoruba land in 1901 and this led to the loss of power over their own lives. Many of their traditions were destroyed. Nigeria became independent again only later in the 20th century, but the second half of the twentieth century saw a lot of warfare and suffering. Several political leaders, and famous thinkers and writers have been killed in recent years. Today, Nigeria is struggling to become a democratic nation with respect for human rights.

In pre-colonial times the Yoruba were the most urban of all African peoples; they inhabited densely populated towns (many over 100,000 in size). The palace of the king (Oba) was traditionally the center of these towns. Perhaps the most important of these towns was Ife, believed to have been founded in 850 AD.

The Yoruba do not only live in Africa nowadays. Because of migration and the slave trade to the Americas in the mid-18th century, there are Yoruba communities throughout the Western world, especially in the Caribbean, South America and North America. One can find clear elements of Yoruba culture today in Cuba and Brazil.

RELIGION

Traditional Yoruba religion has a pantheon of the deities called the Orisha. There are many varieties of Yoruba religion and there are anywhere between 400 and 700 Yoruba gods. Yoruba adults will often honor several of these. Some gods existed before the creation of the earth and others are heroes or heroines from the past that became gods after their deaths. Other gods are even natural objects in their environment such as mountains, hills and rivers that have influenced people's lives and history. Important to the Yoruba religion are storytelling and the journey of life, and these are connected to many sacred rituals.

In the mid-nineteenth century Christian missionaries came to this region and started to have a major impact on the Yoruba people. After European rule took effect at the beginning of the twentieth century, various restrictions were placed on Yoruba religious practices. Many ancient practices were banned, as were some religious groups altogether. For instance, night gatherings, essential to the worship of Ogun, the god of iron and war, were severely restricted. The Yoruba traditionally were able to marry more than one person or close relatives, and when the colonists took power, they outlawed this practice entirely. Also, Yoruba traditionally bury their dead in their houses to create a connection between themselves and their dead relatives. This custom upset the British rulers and they forced the Yoruba to bury their dead in graveyards outside the home.

Due to colonial influence, Christianity has become the major religion since the middle of the twentieth century. The most popular Christian faiths have been the Anglican, Methodist and American Southern Baptist. Some Yoruba have converted to Islam.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

Yoruba have been living and working in city and rural areas for centuries. Some Yoruba men still farm as an occupation. Yam, cassava and corn have been favorite foods in the past, and in the twentieth century cocoa has become an important crop to sell to other countries. Other men work as specialized tradesmen or craftsmen.

Most men will combine city and farm work, moving to the countryside for part of the year. Yoruba women are not involved in the farm work, but control instead much of the market system. A woman's position in society is mostly determined by her own work, and not by her husband's position.

Because they believe that higher education is the path to influence and advancement in society, the Yoruba have been able to dominate the public and private sectors of Nigeria. Many judges, politicians and business people are Yoruba.

Despite the many city-states in the Yoruba region, there are several important common factors that they almost all share: for instance the Yoruba consider the city life to be holy. They also honor the same pantheon of gods and seek guidance from special priests.

CULTURE

There are many types of art among the Yoruba, and many objects are placed on shrines to honor the gods and ancestors. There are beautiful sculptures that have been made with wood and brass. Other important art forms are masks, pottery, weaving, beadwork and working with metal. Musically, the Yoruba are well known for their drumming.

Traditionally, writing has not been the main way for the Yoruba to talk about their history and experiences. Instead, stories and histories are passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Historical and mythical legends, fables, poetry, folktales are very important. Although storytelling is still a favorite activity among Yoruba today, writing has become an important part of the modern tradition; many very famous award winning African writers are Yoruba.

