

Sociology

The History of the Yorubas

©Isaac Akintoyese Oyekola

Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Nigeria



The author of *The History of the Yorubas*, Samuel Johnson, was born into the family of Henry Erugunjinmi Johnson and Sarah Johnson in Freetown, Sierra Leone on June 24, 1846, but spent his adult life in Nigeria. He was the third of the seven children of his parents. His father, Henry Erugunjinmi Johnson, was the grandson of notable King (*Alaafin*) Abiodun. After being captured during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, his father was rerouted to Sierra Leone like many other notable Yorubas like Samuel Ajayi Crowther. It was while in Sierra Leone that Samuel Johnson was given birth. Samuel Johnson later became a missionary. He completed his education at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Training Institute and subsequently taught during the Yoruba civil war. His peace efforts during the 1870s contributed to the eventual end of the Yoruba wars in 1886 (Falola, 1993).

Next, Samuel Johnson, along with Charles Phillips, also of the CMS, organized a ceasefire in 1886 that resulted in a treaty that guaranteed the liberation of the Ekiti towns. Nonetheless, Ilorin refused to cease fighting, and the war dragged on. Samuel Johnson became a Deacon in 1880; and, in 1888, he became a Priest (a Vicar). From 1881, he was based in Oyo and there, he completed the work on the *History of the Yorubas* in 1897. Also, Samuel Johnson was motivated to write on Yoruba history out of fear that his people were losing their history, and that they were beginning to gain better understanding of European history. Unfortunately, his original work was said to be misplaced by his British publishers whether by accident or design. Samuel Johnson eventually died in 1901. However, after his death, his brother Obadiah Johnson recompiled and produced the book using Samuel Johnson's notes. In 1921, the book which was titled *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* was finally published. Unfortunately, Obadiah died in 1920; hence, neither Samuel Johnson nor Obadiah Johnson saw the finished work. Today, the book has provided adequate understanding of Yoruba history both to the Yoruba people and to all who desire to know the history of the Yoruba (Falola, 1993).

Book Review

Johnson's sociohistorical treatise has two parts. The first part contains eight chapters while the second part entails 35 chapters. The first part starts with an introductory section describing the geography, grammatical structure and language of the Yoruba. Johnson states that the Yoruba originated from Lamurudu, one of the kings of Mecca whose offspring were Oduduwa (known to be the ancestor of the Yoruba) and the Kings of the Gogobiri and the Kukawa (two ethnic groups in the Hausa nation). According to Johnson, various ethnic groups (such as Egbas, Ijebus, Ekitis, and Ondos) had their origin from Oduduwa who inhabited the city of Ile-Ife. In fact, the city of

Ile-Ife is said to be the source of all humankind (both Black and White) before spreading to all regions of the earth. Originally, before the introduction of Islam and Christianity, the Yoruba were highly religious, albeit Johnson describes them as pagans. They believed in the existence of Almighty God (called *Olorun*, meaning “Lord of Heaven”), the Maker of Heaven and Earth, but too exalted to govern the affairs of men directly. Hence, the Yoruba admit the existence of many gods as intermediaries, and these they term *Orisas*. The Yoruba are known to possess different belief systems such as belief in a future state (thus, the worship of the dead and invocation of spirits); belief in a future judgment (as may be inferred from the adage that says “Whatever we do on earth we shall give an account thereof at the portals of heaven”); belief in the doctrine of metempsychosis, or transmigration of souls (such as when deceased parents are born again into the family of their surviving children after a period of time; hence, the names *Babatunde* or *Yetunde* meaning “Father comes again or mother comes again, respectively”) (Johnson, 1921).

The government of Yoruba proper is an absolute monarchy and people dreaded the king more than even the gods. Ascension to the throne was hereditary in a family, but not necessarily from father to son, and the king is usually elected by a body of noblemen known as *Qyo Mesi*, the seven principal councilors of the state. According to Johnson, the Yoruba were completely organized and foreign relations before the period of the anarchy were entirely in the hands of the central government at Oyo. The kings differed in grades with *Alaafin* known as the supreme head of all the kings and princes of the Yoruba nation. Detailed description of the coronation, public appearance and funeral of the kings is provided. Johnson further identifies and explains different Yoruba names, and he discusses the naming of a child as being a very important affair celebrated elaborately among the Yoruba. Also, it was believed that every child has at least one of the following three christening names: (1) *Amutorunwa*, the name the child when born; (2) *Abiso*, the christening name; and (3) *Oriki*, the cognomen or attributive name (Johnson, 1921).

The land laws of the Yoruba nation were uncomplicated and effective, as there was enough land for all the members of the various ethnic groups. Any land not well occupied was for the benefit of all the people. Thus, no one was required to own any land which he could not utilize, except farm land left fallow for a short period. Johnson further discusses the manners and customs of the Yoruba. He describes ancient Yoruba people as very simple in their manners, their tastes, and their habits. They built their houses in compounds (called *Agbo Ile*, meaning “flock of houses”); had different styles of facial marks purposely as a means of distinguishing various Yoruba families; ate decent meal without particular timing; cloth themselves in loose flowing robes; practiced monogamic marriage mostly (with the exemption of the wealthy ones) with different stages involved and ceremonies observed; specialized in agriculture, commerce, weaving, iron-smelting, tanning and leather working, carving on wood and on calabashes, music, medicine, barbering, etc. (for men) and women seeded cotton and spun thread; learned through oral traditions; practiced *Iwofa* system; had a peculiar way of forcing payment out of an incorrigible debtor; buried their dead in their houses but not in graveyards or cemeteries; and engaged in war for spoils (Johnson, 1921).

In the second part of the book, Johnson describes the Yoruba kings and contemporary events. In particular, he discusses four periods which include (1) the mythological period, from Oduduwa to Ajaka; (2) the period of growth and prosperity, from Aganju to Abiqdun; (3) the decline, revolutionary wars and disruption, from Aole to Oluewu; and (4) the arrest of disintegration, efforts at restoration of unity, ethnic wars, the British protectorate, from Atiba to Adeyemi. For the first period, Johnson discusses the mythological kings and personages, as well as deified heroes. Emphatically, he identifies Oduduwa, Oranmiyan, Ajuan (alias Ajaka), and

Sango (alias Olufiran) as the founders of the Yoruba nation, and explains their key attributes and contributions to the Yoruba nation (Johnson, 1921).

Vis-à-vis the second period, Johnson considers it to be the period of growth, prosperity and oppression. He provides a historical and political overview of different kings such as Aganju, Kori, Oluaso, Onigbogi, and Ofinran and describes their reigns as prosperous ones for the Yoruba nation. He further describes the reigns of four kings (Eguguoju, Orompoto, Ajiboyede and Abipa or Oba m'oro, meaning “the ghost catcher”) after moving the seat of government to Oyo Igboho. The kings that reigned after these historical kings are described by Johnson as despotic or autocratic. Specifically, Oba lokun Agana Erin (who introduced salt into the Yoruba country), Ajagbo (who reigned for 140 years), Odarawu (who was known to have had a very bad temper), Karan (who was described as unmitigated tyrant), Jayin (who was considered an effeminate and dissolute prince), Ayibi (a grandson to Jayin and tyrant who took delight in shedding blood), Osinyago (described as a worthless and an avaricious king), Ojigi (a brave and very good king but indulgent father), Gberu (a wicked and superstitious king), Amuniwaiye (a weak and despicable king) and Onisile (a different king from his contemporaries who was remarkable for his indomitable courage and lionhearted spirit) were described as a succession of despotic kings (Johnson, 1921).

Johnson further discusses the atrocities of Basorun Gaha and the peaceful reign of Abiodun. Seventeen days into the preliminary ceremonies of the enthronement of Labisi, Basorun Gaha rose to power and started those series of atrocities which made him notorious in Yoruba history. He made himself king maker and destroyer. He lived to a good old age and wielded his power mercilessly. He was noted for having raised five kings to the throne of who he murdered four (Labisi, Awonbioju alias Ouboye, Agboluaje, and Majeogbe) and was himself (along with his children) murdered by the fifth (Abiodun alias Adegbolu) (Johnson, 1921).

The third period is discussed apropos the revolutionary wars and disruptions. The reign after Abiodun denoted the beginning of the downfall of the Yoruba nation. The cup of iniquity of the Yoruba nation was full; cruelty, usurpation, and treachery were widespread, especially in the capital; and the provinces were groaning under the yoke of oppression. Confiscation and slavery for the slightest offence became matters of daily occurrence, and the tyranny, exactions, and lawlessness of the princes and other members of the royal family were simply insupportable. All these provided an opportunity for the rise of the Fulanis (foreigners) to gain power by controlling the whole Kingdom of Ilorin. Several attempts were made to recover Ilorin but to no avail, leading to hope being lost. Among the consequences of the revolution were the divisions in the Yoruba nation, series of wars, and the dilapidated state of the capital during the period. In addition, the outcome of the rebellion of the chiefs and the ensuing revolution was the foundation of modern Ibadan. Abeokuta and Modakeke; the occupation of Ijaye and Abemo; the destruction of the city of Owu; the fall of many ancient towns in the plain; and, above all, the ascendancy of Ilorin under the ravaging foreigners (Johnson, 1921).

Furthermore, the spread of anarchy and political displacement were evident in the destruction of Egba towns and the founding of Abeokuta, the prominence of Egbado ethnic groups and Modakeke, the destruction of the Epo districts and the death of Ojo Amepo. In order to consolidate the balance of power among Ibadans, Egbas and Ijebus, a series of wars were fought. They include the evacuation of Opomu and Owiwi war, fall of Ilaro and Ijana, Omyefun War, Arakanga or Jabara War, Onidese and Oke Isoro Wars, Iperu War, the fall of Ota, civil war at Abemo, and the destruction of Abemo (Johnson, 1921).

The fourth and last period, according to Johnson's classification, was the era of the arrest of

disintegration. Recounted here elaborately are the checkmating of Ilorin, attempts at reconstruction, interethnic wars, and the emergence of the British protectorate (Johnson, 1921).

Book's Greatness

The greatness of the book is first demonstrated in the fact that it is the first and most elaborate book to document the history of the Yoruba from the earliest times up till the time of the arrival of the British (Falola, 1993). Any scholar that desires to grasp an explicit and adequate record and understanding of the Yoruba past will find the book quite germane. Also, the book is considered great because it successfully describes the generation of the Yoruba nation within the Nigerian nationality and not a recorded account of the Yoruba by foreigners. As a result, an objective history of the Yoruba by a Yoruba is narrated in this book. In contrast to Europeans' postulations that Africa, particularly the Yoruba nation, had no history prior to the British invasion and colonialization, this book demonstrates beyond any iota of a doubt that the Yoruba had developed a nation with an institutionalized government, and there is no better place to understand and assess this form of government except in this book.

Furthermore, the book is considered a significant treatise of the history, politics and culture of the Yoruba nation, and it is one of the best books that describe the sociological aspects of government in which history defines the terms and culture of power. It is illuminating and engaging as it describes various oral and recorded accounts of Yoruba history, not only political history, but also its kinship, exchange system, production, customs, traditions, names, ceremonies, language and laws. The book therefore remains the standard reference for the history of the Yoruba people. In addition, due to its relevance and impact, the book has received more than 100 citations on Google Scholar.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several conclusions can be drawn from the review provided here. First, Africa remains the center of world history as it can be deduced that humankind originated from Africa and that the first ancient civilization was recorded in Africa. Thus, any history that leaves out Africa is an incomplete one.

Second, Africa is the reason for the development of developed countries, especially European countries, although Europe might not be entirely responsible for the underdevelopment of African countries today. The first trade contact between Europeans and Africa was favorable only to one party (Europe) at the expense of the other (Africa). Also, the trade took a form of an unequal exchange between the two continents and that resulted in the development of one and underdevelopment of the other.

Third, it can be concluded that Africa had a viable and reliable history before the contact with the Europeans as against the claim of many European scholars that Africa had no history before having contact with the Europeans. This is evident in the analyses that indigenous African institutions (such as political and economic institutions) were experiencing development before such development was disrupted and eventually halted by the European desperadoes. In addition, it can also be concluded from the preceding analysis that the social, political and economic organizations of Black Africa before the formation of modern states were far better than their European counterparts. Nonetheless, contact with the Europeans overturned the reality to the disadvantage of Africa. Last, but not the least, a thorough understanding of indigenous African

institutions and adaptation (not adoption) of foreign policies to suit indigenous institutions is vitally important for the actualization of social, political, economic and cultural development on the continent of Africa.

It is therefore recommended that some key courses in African History be made compulsory for all students in Africa and Black universities and colleges in the Diaspora in order to keep and sustain the African heritage. Decolonization, de-neo-colonization and indigenization of the social sciences in Africa and the Diaspora for epistemic freedom from intellectual dependence are also recommended. This is important for the better understanding of African societies and for the maximum utilization of both theoretical and practical sociological knowledge of Africa. In addition, African leaders should look both inward and outward before suggesting applicable solutions to African challenges. Finally, a multidisciplinary perspective is germane for the proper understanding of Africa's history and development.

References

Falola, T. (1993). *Pioneer, Patriot and Patriarch: Samuel Johnson and the Yoruba People*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison Press.

Johnson, S. (1921). *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.