

BOOK REVIEW

Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola. *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 496 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$39.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-107-68394-5

The Yoruba ethnic group has intrigued scholars of Africa for at least one hundred years. The Reverend Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* was first published in 1921. Since then, there have been many treatises on the cultural and societal foundations, political and economic development, identity formation, and diaspora of the Yoruba. Each study offers its own unique addition to the scholarship, and Aribidesi Usman and Toyin Falola's book *The Yoruba from Prehistory to the Present* is no different in this regard. Their book features a very accessible overview of Yoruba history from prehistoric times to the present, with three main areas of differentiation. First, it centers a narrative of the Yoruba that begins with their pre-historic existence (as few volumes do). Second, it gives considerable attention to other Yoruba polities outside of Ile Ife and Oyo (while most focus on Ife and Oyo primarily). Third, it has a goal of incorporating the rich archaeological evidence that is available from various other sources.

The book is divided into six sections with twenty chapters (delineated by precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial independent periods); it begins with a conversation on the origins of the Yoruba using oral tradition, archaeology, and linguistic sources. Evidence is presented in Chapter One that refutes the generally accepted idea of Yoruba origins having been in the Middle East or North Africa (3). There is also an etymology of the name "Yoruba" (4–5), along with a linguistic analysis of some dialects of Yoruba subgroups, showing that they are linked by strong cultural characteristics evidenced in linguistic patterns, regardless of their geographic proximity (13–17). Chapter Two is devoted to a general prehistory of the Yoruba, based heavily on archaeological data from the Early, Middle, and Late Stone Age periods, which aligns with the first and third objectives. It features hammer stones, stone axes, palm kernels, human remains, rock shelters, and iron smelting centers, with a reference to settlement and farming as well. The authors state that widespread agriculture in Africa developed only between 6,000 and 5,000 B.C., and that Mesopotamia is noted as the earliest area with agriculture

“according to records,” though no records are cited. Early sources have argued that archeological evidence suggests that agriculture in West Africa may have existed as early as 10,000 B.C. (Davies, *The Origins of Agriculture in West Africa*, 1968).

As the book progresses, the second objective is addressed. In the discussions on Yoruba societies, the question of why some areas developed states and kingdoms while others did not is posed as a means of discussing the growth of complex societies. The authors contend that this is not a question that most studies address (58). They state that the ability to provide resources is a significant determining factor in the growth of complex societies. The proximity of any settlements to high traffic areas and trade routes supported their transformation into statehood because it enabled them to sustain population growth through the provision of easier access to more resources. In later chapters of the book, the authors discuss currents that shaped the rise and fall of Yoruba kingdoms, especially in the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The way that the text navigates this era and synthesizes scholarship on the topic is straightforward and concise. It focuses on the indigenous people in such a way that they are not subsumed by the conversation on the slave trade.

The latter parts of the book address politics, culture, and identity formation among the Yoruba over time. Part Four focuses on economic and social practices. For example, Chapter Eleven begins with the question, *what did the Yoruba do for a living?* and goes on to examine various occupations from pre-colonial agriculture, hunting, and fishing, to craft industries (such as cloth weaving, pot making, and iron working). In Chapter Twelve, there is a very accessible discussion of Yoruba religion, including the concepts of an Almighty God, heaven, the pantheon of lesser deities, and ancestor veneration. Chapter Thirteen focuses on creative endeavors such as the arts, bodily adornment, and music. There is a wonderful conversation on hair braiding which discusses the different types of styles, including the patterns, along with their names, specific uses, and meanings.

Parts Five (Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen) and Six (Chapters Sixteen through Twenty) focus on the colonial and postcolonial eras of Yoruba development. In these last two sections there is a very easily followed explanation of how the Yoruba identity has been defined. Nationalism, of course, was an important part of this process. Chapter Fourteen speaks to changes that came with colonial rule, and Chapter Fifteen addresses the growing ethnic consciousness which led to anticolonial resistance. The narrative of nationalism did mention women such as Funmilayo Kuti and some women’s groups, but the conversation was mostly focused on politically elite male leaders. This highlights one issue apparent throughout the book, which is that there are areas that could have benefited from a more complex and in-depth gender analysis.

Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen give an overview of political developments in the post-independence era, including the growth of political parties, military coups, the Nigerian Civil War, and the different Republics. The final chapters address contemporary politics and sociopolitical, economic, and

cultural transformation. Chapter Eighteen begins with the election of President Obasanjo in 2003 and speaks to the strivings of political parties through 2016. Chapter Nineteen highlights some of the most significant changes to Yoruba society in contemporary times, such as the dissolution of the lineage compound as well as widespread practices influenced by Christianity, Islam, and western education. Chapter Twenty is a conclusion which sums up the complexity of Yoruba history and societal changes.

The book is very detailed and well written; it would be a good choice for students as well as for use as a reference text for specialists and non-specialists alike. It is a welcome addition to Yoruba studies scholarship, as it joins the few texts that portray Yoruba development as a narrative over time. Its purpose is to offer a readable yet scholarly reference text for the general reader for whom other rich works on the Yoruba may not be accessible, and it achieves this goal very well.

Maria Martin 

University of California, Merced

Merced, California, USA

mmartin360@ucmerced.edu

doi:[10.1017/asr.2022.1](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.1)

If you liked this, you may also enjoy:

Sofola, J. A. 1971. "The Experiences, Opinions, and Attitudes of Yoruba Repatriates of the Former Eastern (Iboland) Region Aspects of the Pre-Crisis Interethnic Contacts and Relations in Nigeria." *African Studies Review* 14 (1): 1–30. doi:[10.2307/523609](https://doi.org/10.2307/523609).

Trotman, David V. 1976. "The Yoruba and Orisha Worship in Trinidad and British Guinea: 1838–1870." *African Studies Review* 19 (2): 1–18. doi:[10.2307/523560](https://doi.org/10.2307/523560).