

# Yoruba as a City-State Culture

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Yoruba “towns” (*ilu*) are well known as an exceptional case within African studies, as showing the highest level of pre-colonial “urbanization”, that is of the proportion of the population living in large, dense nucleated settlements, in the whole continent south of the Sahara. And not just this, but more directly relevant to the topic in hand, these settlements have characteristically had distinctive political institutions, the organs of government of small polities of which they were the centre, and to which they gave their name. The Yoruba meet so many of the criteria that Hansen has built into his ideal-types of “city-state” and “city-state culture” that it is not surprising that their *ilu* have sometimes been compared to the *poleis* of Classical Greece. Yet the most interesting thing about Yorubaland is not that it makes a neat typological fit, but that its communities and sub-regions are so diverse – some of them fit the ideal type closely, others hardly at all – that it presents an ideal terrain for exploring the dynamics of city-state formation. In so doing we need to combine two traditions of work in Yoruba studies which have tended to be pursued somewhat independently of one another: one by geographers and anthropologists on Yoruba urbanism and urbanization (Bascom [1955, 1962]; Schwab [1965]; Mabogunje [1968]; Krapf-Askari [1969]), and one mostly by historians on state-formation (Smith [1969]; Lloyd [1971]; Obayemi [1976]; Adediran [1994]).

The Yoruba-speaking peoples occupy a territory of some 90,000 square km, between the lower Niger and the coast of West Africa, the great bulk of it in what is now south-western Nigeria. Set deep in the humid tropics, the southern part of their country was rain forest, while to the north lay drier, more open savannah. The basis of the economy was farming – yam and maize being the staples – and there was an extensive practice of crafts: iron-working, weaving and dyeing, tanning, potting, wood-carving, food-processing. Though most farming was to meet subsistence needs, there was also was a widespread commercial network, with cowries as its medium of exchange, and local markets for farm produce and manufactures. Long-distance trade routes ran south-

north, based on the exchange of coastal and forest products for those of the interior, eventually connecting with the trans-Saharan trade through the Hausa kingdoms of what is now Northern Nigeria. Later the Yoruba were also directly or (in most cases) indirectly connected to the Atlantic trade, which grew in its strategic significance for relations between their polities. The greatest Yoruba state of this period, the so-called “Oyo Empire”, drew its power from the fact that it straddled these two spheres of external trade, stretching from the Atlantic lagoons to the River Niger (Law [1975]). Despite strong affinities of language and culture, and shared traditions of origin, these peoples did not know themselves by a common name until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the term “Yoruba” – a Hausa name for Oyo, first adopted by missionaries – came into general use. We thus have the paradox that the ethnic label by which we designate the Yoruba city-state culture belongs to the period when the Yoruba *ilu* were, through their incorporation into Nigeria, fast losing their character as city-states.

While the very idea of a statistically average *ilu* would be meaningless, such is the variation in both population and territory, it is helpful to begin with a brief description of an *ilu* that stands in roughly the middle of the range, and also fits Hansen’s ideal-type fairly closely. This is Ilesha, the capital of the Ijesha kingdom, which has existed continuously since at least the late sixteenth century (for a full account, see Peel [1979-80, 1983]). The town, about 3 km across within its circuit of mud-built walls and ditch, had a population of perhaps 30-40,000 people at its pre-colonial maximum, before its sack by the Ibadan army in 1870. Ilesha lay at the centre of a territory extending outwards some 20-30 km in each direction, which included over 160 subordinate settlements in the mid-nineteenth century, none of them anywhere near Ilesha in size – a handful of the largest perhaps 2-3,000 people. These settlements were of varied character: some were ancient settlements of independent foundation later brought under Ilesha’s hegemony, others had been founded as out-settlements from

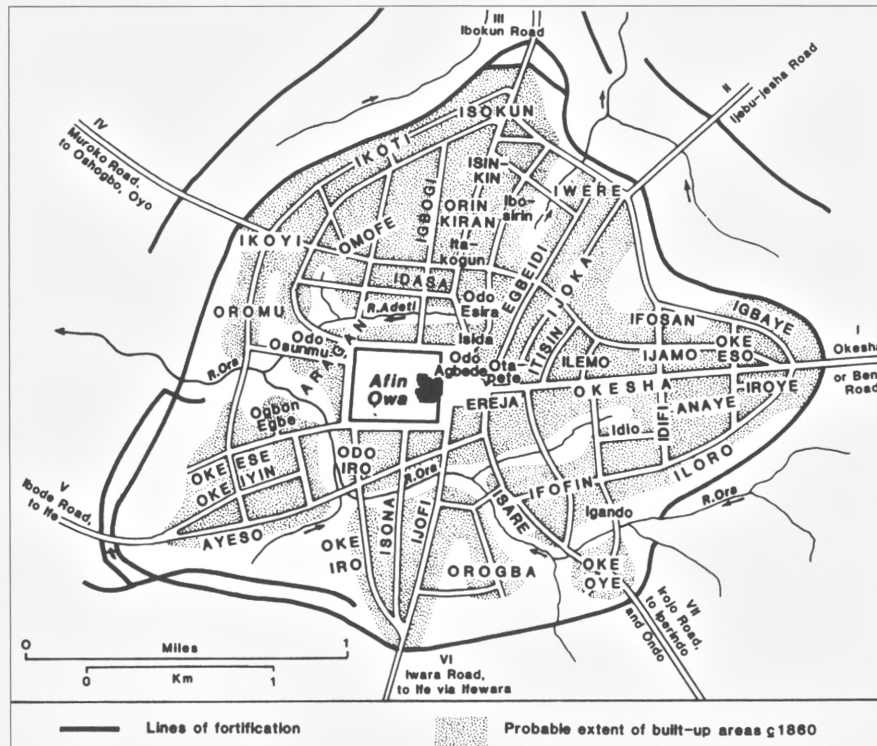


Fig. 1. The *Ilu* of Ilesha, the town and its quarters.

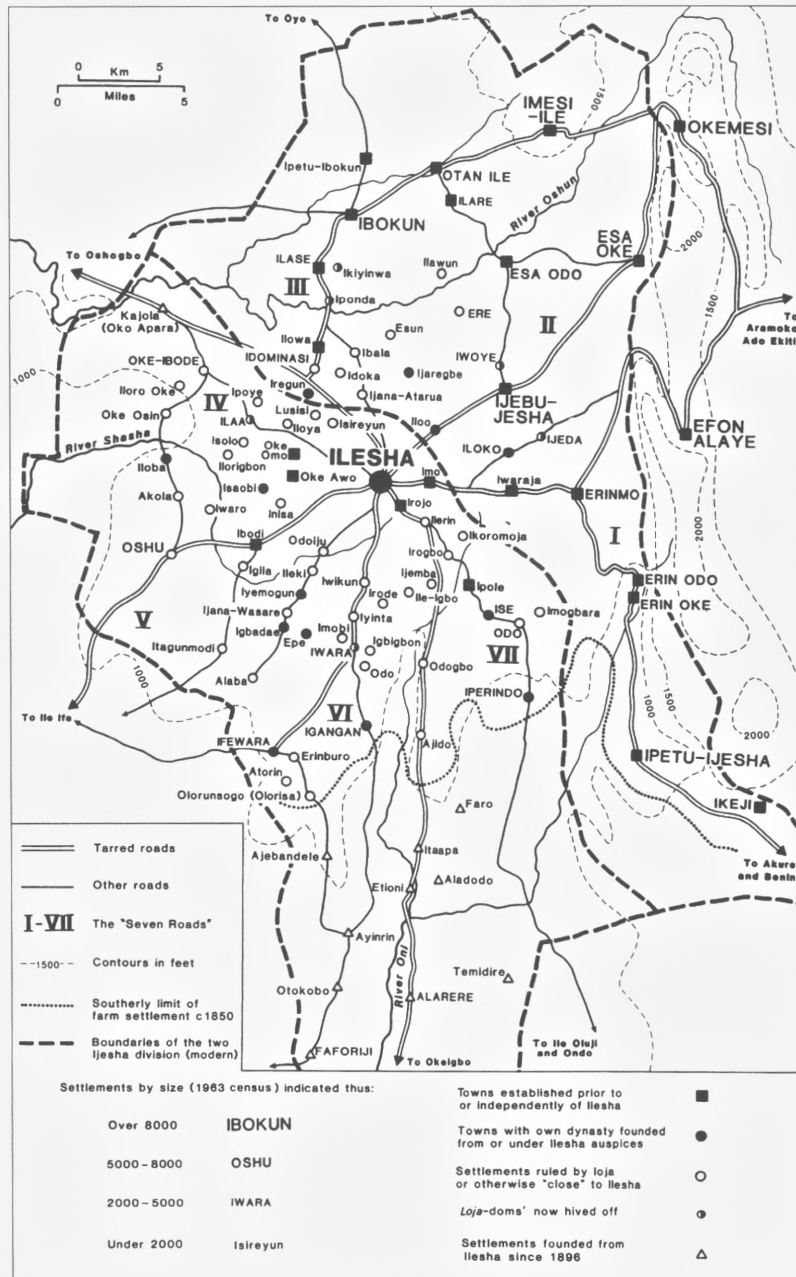
Ilesha; some had their own ruling dynasties, others were headed by a scion of the Ilesha royal lineage; some were communities in their own right, with their own local cults and festivals, others – a large number, either close to Ilesha itself, or in newly cleared land towards the southern forests – were farm-hamlets of people who lived there much of the time, but whose home-base was still a compound in Ilesha. Yet the distinction between Ilesha and her subordinate settlements did not rest on economic complementarity, since Ilesha's citizens were mostly farmers.

If we are to determine whether the Yoruba constituted a city-state *culture*, we need to complete our description of the external forms of their communities with an understanding of how they conceived of them. What exactly does the key term *ilu* mean? Nowadays, when the Yoruba are more “urbanized” than ever before but are fully incorporated into a large territorial state, it is most often used to refer to a “town”, but less as a physical aggregation than a community of a certain kind, a “home-town” to which all Yoruba are presumed to belong. Before colonialism, *ilu* were the main political units, there being no other term that can be translated as “state”, “kingdom”, “nation” or “country” in a political sense. (The modern word *ijoba*, derived from *oba*, “king”, refers to rule or institutions of government – such as the British administration of colonial Nigeria – rather than to a kingdom

as a political unit; the old-fashioned way of referring to the United Kingdom is as *Ilu Geesi*, “the *ilu* of the English”.) A native or citizen, the equivalent of the Greek *polites*, was an *omo ilu* (“child of the town”), with a connotation of membership by descent. In the paradigm case – of the exceptions, more anon – the name of the town or chief settlement also served as the name of the people and the polity. In this conceptual unity of town and kingdom – the defining mark of the city-state – Yoruba *ilu* differ from most of the other West African kingdoms with which they are often compared (Forde and Kaberry [1967]). Among the Akan states of what is now Ghana, the political unit was the *oman* (“state” or “nation”), which typically did not take its name from the capital-town (e.g. the Asante nation had its capital at Kumasi). Likewise, Abomey was the capital of the Fon-speaking kingdom of Dahomey, a small territorial state divided into six or seven provinces.

But as well as meaning a state, comprising both the capital and its dependent territory, *ilu* also refers to the capital-town in contrast to its rural hinterland – similar to the whole-and-part usage of *polis* among the Ancient Greeks (Hansen [1998] 17-34). In Ilesha the contrast was expressed as *ilu* vs. *ileto*, the latter term meaning “village” or the rural area generally (Peel [1983] 55). The essential feature of *ileto* – as of such other terms as *aba* and the even smaller *abule* (“ham-

Fig. 2. The *Ilu* of Ilesha, the kingdom.



let”) – was not so much their size, or even that farming was their principal activity, but that they were not places that their inhabitants considered as “home”: that is, they were not where people were buried, or where they held their festivals, or exercised their main rights and duties as *omo ilu*. Hence the capital/hinterland distinction was sometimes simply put as *ile* (“house, home”) vs. *oko* (“farm”). A corollary of this distinction was the notion that only in the *ilu* could cultural ideals be fully realized, while people who lived most of the time in villages were uncouth yokels or *ara oko* (“farm residents”, rendered disparagingly

in today’s Nigerian English as “bushmen”). But though this was a hegemonic view of the capital-town, it could be challenged. For if the *ilu* was where people’s homes were, then wherever people lived was a potential *ilu* for them. I well remember asking the chiefs of Isaobi, a small place of barely more than two dozen houses about 10 km out of town, which Ilesha people regarded as very “bush”, what its status as a community was. They replied indignantly, “*Ilu naa ni o!* [It certainly *is* a town]”. It had not been founded from Ilesha as a village, they insisted, but incorporated in Ilesha’s territory at a later stage; it had

distinctive cults of its own; its sons took their family titles and would be buried there.

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The dynamics of city-state formation, so far only hinted at, cannot be approached without a fuller picture of the variety of the forms of settlement and polity. From this it will appear that, though the values around the concept of *ilu* were strong in the heartland of the Yoruba-speaking region, they were imperfectly realized towards its periphery. Among groups like the Bunu and the Yagba of the far north-east (Obayemi [1976]; Renne [1995]), the Ikale and Ilaje of the south-east (Richards [1992]), and the Ana and other scattered groups of the far west, residence was in nucleated settlements – usually of the size of a large village or small town – but with little hierarchization of communities, a strongly defined central place, or a full-blown kingship. The “nine tribes” of the Ikale formed a federation under a ritual leader, the *Abodi*, but more important were the *oloja* (“rulers of the market”) of each settlement. How this might seem to a visitor from “Yoruba Proper” was put in the description of the Ikale given by the Revd Samuel Johnson, a Yoruba pastor and author of the classic *The History of the Yorubas* (1921), after passing through their country in 1879: “[They live] in thickets without any regular town. Each village consists of a family or families and the headman is their chief ... No sign of royalty to distinguish them, they are all in their primitive state” (quoted Peel [1998] 76). The ambiguity of defining the “polity” in these areas is evident equally in the variety of labels given these groups – “clans”, “village-groups”, “mini-states” – and in the uncertainty as to whether the single settlement or, if as commonly occurs, some federation or association of settlements, should be treated as the germ from which larger, more centralized polities would grow.

Though no sharp cut-off point can be posited between these groups and *ilu* in the central Yoruba area more fully realized as city-states, one thing above all made the difference: the institution of kingship. Yoruba kings (*oba*) were the point of intersection between their people and the gods, their prime function being to intercede with them to ensure human health and welfare; they were themselves held to be quasi-divine (*ekeji orisa* or “second to the gods”); their legitimacy was based on their descent from Oduduwa, who was an aspect or refraction of the Supreme Being in the capacity of ancestor, and was held to have established the prototype of the Yoruba

political order at Ife (Law [1973]; Akinjogbin [1992]). The Ife bronzes alone indicate that culturally something exceptional happened at Ife, and modern archaeology suggests an occupation that began before the end of the first millennium and reached an apogee associated with Ife’s most important artefacts around 1400 AD. A palace complex in the centre of an area roughly 4 km by 4 km, with a series of unevenly concentric walls, suggests growth by stages over a long period (Ozanne [1969]; Connah [1987] 131-4). Situated towards the northern boundary of the forest, Ife’s growth may have had a necessary condition in the capacity of Ife’s early rulers to access the resources of south-north trade routes, though it is hardly a sufficient condition of it. More plausible is Horton’s argument (1979) that a major reorientation caused by the opening of the Atlantic trade in the Sixteenth century led to Ife’s decline, and the rise of Oyo and Benin, as well as smaller states closer to hand, such as Ijebu, Owu, and Ilesha. However, Ife retained its status as the primary sacred centre for the entire region, and provided the model for the development of a city-state culture built on large nucleated settlements focussed on the palace-complex (*afin*) of a sacred king.

“Traditional” city-state Yorubaland – that is roughly between 1600 and 1900 – fell into two broad zones. From the centre to the north-west lay the open savannah country which into the early nineteenth century was dominated by a single polity, the so-called Oyo Empire, named from its capital-town situated to the far north in the Niger valley. In a wide arc curving round the southern and eastern edges of Oyo country, mostly in the forest, lay a band of many middling to small polities, exhibiting great variety of form. Since Oyo stands at the other end of the morphological spectrum from the village-groups or “pre-city-states” of the periphery, being closest to a territorial “post-city-state” polity (though not really getting there), it makes sense to start with this south-eastern arc. Moreover, since Ife lies roughly in the middle of it and its existing towns were less affected by the upheavals of the early nineteenth century than the Oyo area, where many old communities were destroyed and new ones founded, we are here likely to be closer to the early forms of the Yoruba city-state.

The key issue is the variable relations between the capital-town (*ilu alade*, “crowned town”, as it may be called in Yoruba), subordinate towns, and any regional or “supra-*ilu*” identities. If our bench-mark is a single, unitary *ilu*, named after its capital-town, with anything up to a few dozen subordinate out-settle-

ments, then its characteristic instances – places like Ife, Akure, Owo, Ilesha, Ondo, Ila-Orangun or Ado-Ekiti – mostly lie in this area, though Ketu to the west also fits. At either end of the arc, where the average size of *ilu* tends to be smaller, traces of alternative, perhaps earlier patterns may be found, such as the existence of ethnic or regional identities at a supra-*ilu* level. To the north-east, groupings such as the Igbomina, Ekiti and Akoko have sometimes been called “tribes”. But this is misleading if it is taken to mean much more than their being recognized to share speech-forms and cultural traits (such as the prevalence of certain cults or titles) which distinguish them from neighbouring groups. They were still clusters of *ilu*, among which one or another might be accorded some kind of primacy (usually contested by others), but without any regular, transcending political organization. Such a case might be most easily made for the Ekiti – the name is a geographical designation, referring to the hilly nature of their country – who expressed their affinity in terms of a notional “sixteen kings”. In the late nineteenth century this was invoked in a temporary political alliance called *Ekitiparapo* to check the military power of Ibadan (Akintoye [1971]). But the given lists of the sixteen kings vary, and not all “Ekiti” kingdoms participated in the alliance (which was in any case headed by Ilesha). We should see the notion of a “brotherhood” of the Ekiti kings less as the token of a federation, than an idiom to convey a mesh of affinities and occasional alliances among a group of mostly small, but entirely autonomous, *ilu*. The same can be said of the neighbouring Igbomina (Pemberton & Afolayan [1996]).

The Ijebu and the Egba in the south did have more clearly federal systems, as is implied by the fact that their names do not derive from the name of their respective capital-towns. In Ijebu’s case the capital-town is distinguished by the addition of the term *Ode*, whose core meaning is “outside”. It occurs elsewhere, with varying connotations: at Ilesha, the town-chiefs, as against the palace-chiefs, are called *t’ode* (“of the outside”); the capital-town of Ondo used to be known as Ode Ondo; while among the decentralized Ikale, the sites where external trade and diplomacy took place were called *ode*. Its use underscores that the centre of a kingdom was the point of its political articulation with the wider world. Ijebu is one of the earliest Yoruba kingdoms of which we have contemporary evidence: already in 1505 a Portuguese source refers to “a very large city called Geebuu, surrounded by a great moat ... [whose] ruler is called Agusale ...”, trading in slaves and ivory (Pacheco

Pereira, cited in Hodgkin [1960]). The reference is to Ijebu Ode, to the great earthwork a few kilometers out from its centre called the *Eredo* (whose traces still exist), and probably to the title of the Ijebu paramount ruler, the *Awujale*. The Ijebu kingdom was one of the largest after Oyo, about 6,000 square km in total extent, and included many subordinate towns, some with traditions of foundation from Ijebu, some claiming independent origin from Ife; a western tract, called Ijebu Remo, comprised a further dozen or more small towns under a “sub-paramount” ruler, the *Akarigbo*. Ijebu’s regional standing depended on its control of the trade routes from the coast to the interior, which was made possible by an unusual degree of cultural, political and economic integration within the kingdom. The Ijebu spoke a highly distinctive dialect, and all males in the kingdom belonged to named age-sets inaugurated every three years by the *Awujale* at Ijebu Ode. The core area of the kingdom was integrated by the Agemo cult, whose sixteen or more priests from autonomous towns made an annual pilgrimage to be received by the *Awujale* in the capital, ritually expressing both their rivalry and their interdependence (Drewal [1992] chapter 7). Moreover, Ijebu Ode, though relatively small in relation to the size of the whole kingdom, was more “truly urban” than other Yoruba towns, in that the great majority of its inhabitants were not farmers, but traders and craftsmen, while farmers preponderated in the smaller Ijebu towns (Lloyd [1962] chapter 6). In other words, there was an extent of economic differentiation between the capital-town and its district that was not found in most other Yoruba *ilu*. Ijebu, then, had some of the makings of a territorial state.

Before the 1820s, there lay to the north of Ijebu two very different political entities: one was a unitary *ilu* called Owu, the other was the Egba, a loose federation of between (according to various later traditions) 140 and 300+ small towns. This high degree of fragmentation says much about the geopolitical character of the area: a frontier shatter-zone within the northern margins of the forest between the more highly organized polities of Ijebu and Oyo. The Egba towns were divided into three sections, each under the ruler of one of them presiding as *primus inter pares*, with the *Alake* (king of Ake) as senior to all. The functions of this supra-*ilu* organization seem to have been largely to do with the settlement of disputes between *ilu* – until, that is, a leader called Lisabi organized an inter-*ilu* militia which in the late eighteenth century succeeded in throwing off the control of Oyo, to which the Egba had been tributary. But the Egba towns

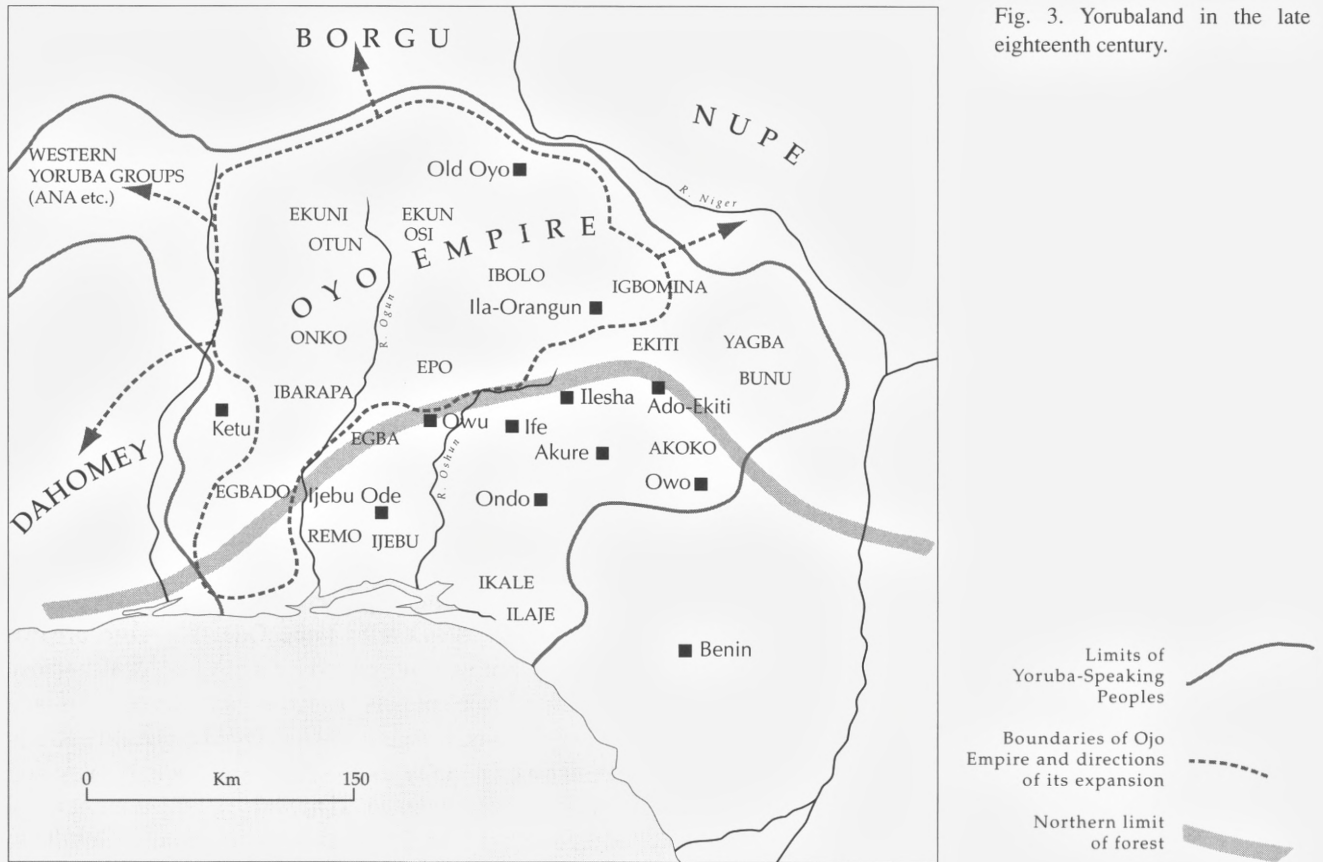


Fig. 3. Yorubaland in the late eighteenth century.

remained so disunited that when widespread disorder broke out in the 1820s after the sack of Owo by a joint force of Ijebus and Ifes, they were destroyed one by one. About 1830, groups of Egba refugees collected themselves together at a defensive site they called Abeokuta (“Under the rock”) by the Ogun River on the western fringe of their former territory. Here many of the old *ilu* kept their identity and internal organization as “townships” within the new unified Egba capital, which by the 1850s was estimated to have a population of 60,000 – at least twice the size of Ijebu Ode. This *synoikismos* at last produced an effective military organization, with pan-Egba titles, enabling Abeokuta to beat off the hostile power of Dahomey and to bring into its orbit a number of small independent towns to its west and south. Yet its own civil government remained divided, for Abeokuta was a town with four *oba*: one for each of the Egba sections, and one for those Owo refugees who later joined them. But if the internal structure of the capital was highly complex, the organization of the kingdom was relatively simple: apart from the conquered towns, its subordinate settlements were essentially the farm villages of people who looked to their townships now incorporated into the capital. The Egba, who had been a

federation of very small *ilu*, became one of the most powerful city-states of the Yoruba (Biobaku [1957]).

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So what of Oyo, whose presence has already been felt in the preceding account, though it has dealt with *ilu* which largely remained beyond its frontier? The town of Oyo (*Oyo-Ile* or “Home Oyo”), which on the eve of its abandonment in the early 1830s enclosed some 35-40 square km within its walls, lay close to the northern extremity of Yoruba-speaking territory, and its early orientation was largely to the non-Yoruba peoples to its north, despite the Ife origins claimed by its dynasty. Its ruler was known as the *Alafin* (“lord of the palace”). By 1600 it had embarked on what Law calls its “imperial period”, which saw its incorporation of the greater part of the savannah region of Yorubaland, the reduction to tributary status of its nearer northern neighbours and of Dahomey to the south-west, and eventually the establishment of an avenue of control as far as the coast, which enabled it to derive advantage from the Atlantic slave trade. In the interior, Oyo’s power was based on cavalry, which permitted extensive command of the open savannah, but was

unable to operate in the forest. As it expanded southwards, Oyo brought many hitherto independent *ilu* under its control. They retained their own hereditary rulers, whether these continued to be recognized as crowned *oba* (“kings”), or were accorded the lesser title of *bale*. Though *bale* is the standard term for “village-head”, its connotation is less one of size than of political and symbolic status: some of the largest Yoruba towns, such as Ogbomoso, had head-chiefs styled *Bale* until well into the twentieth century. Oyo required of its subordinate towns an annual tribute, presented in person by their rulers at the great Bere festival, so called from the *bere* grass they had to bring for roofing the palace. They also had to supply contingents to the Oyo army. Their rulers had to be approved, and might be deposed, by the *Alafin*, who reserved to himself certain judicial powers, acted as a final court of appeal and settled disputes among the subordinate towns (Law [1977] chapter 6). Since many of these subordinate towns had smaller settlements under them, Oyo was not merely the largest Yoruba state, but also the most complex, since it was essentially a three-tier polity, compared to *ilu* like Ijebu or Ilesha, which were two-tier, or the smaller peripheral *ilu*, which might be one-tier.

The question then arises: did this complexity push Oyo towards becoming a territorial, rather than a city state? The main evidence for such a shift was the designation of several “provinces” (*ekun*), variously said to have been four or eight in number, through which tribute and military levies were mustered. Each *ekun* had a distinctive name, the first two just being called Ekun Otun and Ekun Osi (respectively Provinces to the Right and the Left, *sc.* of the River Ogun), then Epo, Ibolu, Onko, Ibarapa etc. They were led, not by a governor as such, but by the *oba* of one of their towns, acting as a kind of primate. A further token of the territorial spread of Oyo was the institution, in the late seventeenth century, of the office of *Are-Ona-Kakamfo* or commander of the provincial levies, in contrast to the *Basorun*, the senior non-royal chief of Oyo itself, who commanded the forces of the capital. This command might be held by the ruler of any provincial town, chosen by the *Alafin* for his military reputation. But even this degree or “territorialization” rested on the presumption that *ilu* remained the building-blocks of the imperial polity of Oyo: its internal structure consisted essentially of relations between *ilu*, and its overall integration depended on the institutions of the capital town. For the main way in which a subordinate town related to the centre was not through the provinces but through some particular

chief or officeholder in Oyo, who acted as its patron, in return for which he received a share of the tribute that it sent to the *Alafin*. On the other hand, the *Alafin* had his own means to exercise control throughout the empire: his greatly-feared messengers carried his delegated authority, and in many provincial towns he had a locally resident official, often a royal slave, known as an *ajele*, to keep an eye on things. Law suggests that over time, and especially in the far south-west where rich benefits from the slave-trade beckoned, the *Alafin* were able to aggrandize their authority at the expense of both provincial rulers and the free, non-royal chiefs of the capital.

The causes of Oyo’s collapse in the early nineteenth century need not concern us here, but it is doubtful if rivalry between the *Alafin* and his chiefs within the capital, or between Oyo and the provincial towns would have had their far-reaching effects without the new factor of Islamic *jihad* spilling over from the Sokoto Caliphate to the north (Last [1967]). A former provincial town to the south-east of Oyo, Ilorin, became a new kind of *ilu*, substantially Yoruba but with a Fulani emir acknowledging Sokoto as his suzerain. As disorder spread and many towns in the northern heartland of the empire were sacked, there was a massive flood of Oyo refugees to the south and east, even into the forest. They swelled the populations of existing towns, such as Ogbomoso, Osogbo, Ede and Iwo; and founded new ones, like New Oyo, Ijaye and Ibadan. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century these towns were variously estimated to have populations ranging from 40,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, larger than nearly all the old towns of the forest belt. At New Oyo, a scion of the old dynasty tried to recreate the old imperial capital, but it never attained anything like the size or power of its predecessor. The vacuum created by the fall of Old Oyo was filled, if that is a way of regarding it, by Ibadan, a new *ilu* of quite an unprecedented character.

Ibadan was founded in the 1830s on the site of a former Egba town by a mixed force of Oyo, Ife, Ijebu and Egba warriors, among whom the Oyos soon became predominant. Hastily settled as an agglomeration of war-bands and lacking a royal dynasty – though formal recognition was given to the *Alafin* 50 km away at New Oyo – Ibadan evolved as a turbulent military republic. Its principal warlords evolved a system of ranked military titles (and later some civil ones), which were allocated in a roughly promotional system with as much mutual agreement as their intense personal rivalries would allow. Phases of relatively collective leadership alternated with longer

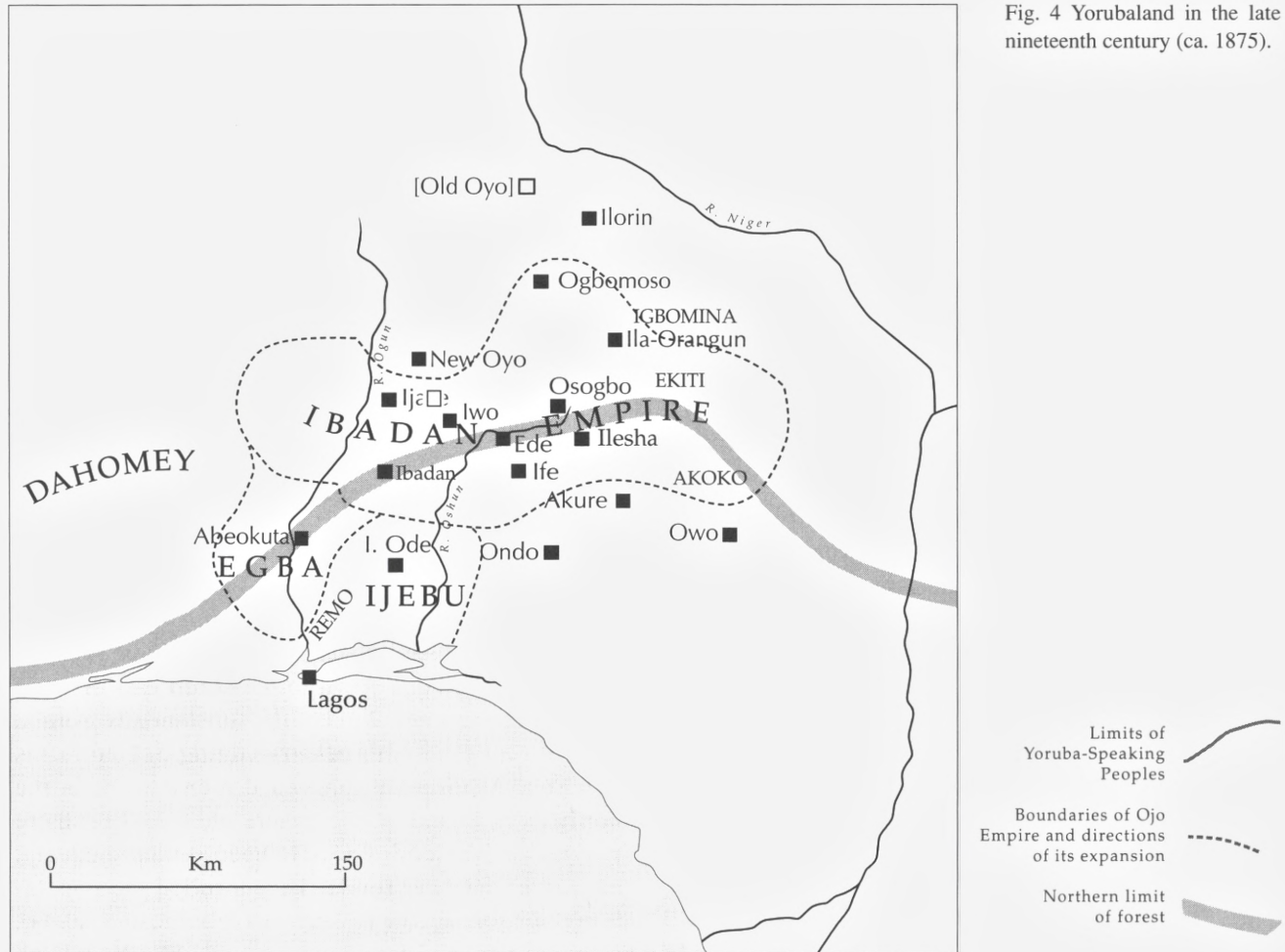


Fig. 4 Yorubaland in the late nineteenth century (ca. 1875).

periods when one surpassing war-leader, backed by a large following of slaves and warrior clients, was dominant. Ibadan's proud nickname was *ilu jagun-jagun* ("the warrior city"), and so continuous were its wars that its forces virtually became a professional army. Being situated in the forest, Ibadan could not rely on cavalry; but a ready supply of guns was now available from Europeans on the coast. To finance their import, Ibadan had to generate exports – palm-oil was the principal item – so it was driven to extort tribute and slaves from its neighbours.

It first brought under its control a belt of the more southerly Oyo-Yoruba towns; in the 1850s it started to drive eastwards into Ekiti; by 1862 it had erased its main Oyo-Yoruba rival, Ijaye, a new town like itself; Ilesha was sacked and made a tributary in 1870; and at its apogee in 1878, Ibadan's dominion embraced upwards of a third of the Yoruba country, in a band that extended some 300 km from west to east. Much more hastily assembled and less enduring than Old Oyo's, Ibadan's "empire" still drew on similar mecha-

nisms of integration, except that there were no "provinces": the Ibadan Empire departed even less from being an aggregation of individual *ilu*. Yet though there was no *oba* or palace organization at its centre, there was a similar two-way system of control: each subordinate town had a chiefly patron at Ibadan, and Ibadan's interests were represented locally by a resident *ajele* – the term came from Old Oyo – appointed by the Ibadan chiefs in council. Ibadan was ultimately checked by an uprising of its eastern tributaries who made common cause with its other enemies, principally Ilorin to the north, and Abeokuta and Ijebu to the south. The resultant stalemate was only resolved by the intervention of the British, who during the 1890s annexed the greater part of Yorubaland to their colony of Lagos, later incorporated into Nigeria.

Without the colonial intervention, the collapse of the Ibadan Empire would have seen the re-emergence of the pre-existing order of city-states. What colonialism brought, however, was the conditions for the eventual demise of Yoruba as a city-state culture. A



proper system of provincial administration was established, and while the idea of loyalty to one's *ilu* – now as “home-town” – remained very important, it coexisted with new regional, religious and class identities constituted at much wider levels. Nevertheless, the civic culture of Yoruba towns, though city-states no longer, remains profoundly influenced by this background, just as is the case in northern Italy, the Low Countries and ex-Hanseatic cities like Hamburg and Bremen in modern Europe.

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The particular form of this Yoruba exit from a full-blown city-state culture, through the external imposition of a territorial colonial state, prompts the thought as to whether it might have come about by some endogenous route. What may have impeded it is usefully brought out when we compare the social dynamics of Yoruba city-states with those of two other cases: the city-states of Antiquity and of the Middle Ages. Max Weber ([1978]) drew our attention to some marked differences underlying the apparent similarities. The Greek *poleis* were composed in the main of farmer-soldiers, whose privileges as citizens rested on the labour of slaves of alien origin; class struggles within the community were essentially *political* in character, concerning such rights or conditions of citizenship as the franchise or issues around the landlessness or indebtedness of poorer citizens. The medieval cities were truly “bourgeois”, with political status dependent on the membership of occupational guilds; in the absence of slavery, the lower class consisted of wage-labourers, and class-struggle was essentially *economic* in character, concerned with the terms of their employment. In both cases, these class struggles led towards the absorption of the city-states into larger territorial polities – upon which, however, they left decisive traces. The city-states of Antiquity were swallowed by a great agrarian empire, which yet prided itself on upholding the urban values of the city-state culture which had preceded it. The medieval ones were taken over by middle-sized dynastic, and later nation-, states, which provided the scaffolding for the emergence of bourgeois society, that is one where the economic values of the cities became general.

Yoruba city-states clearly have more in common with those of Classical Antiquity than of the Middle Ages. Their citizens were typically farmers (Weber's *Ackerburger*), who lived in the city and farmed its territory; the distinction between natives (*omo ilu* or

*ibile*, “children of the town”, or “sons of the soil”) and strangers (*alejo*) was crucial; the status of the free was underpinned by the exploitation of slaves, outsiders who were either bought or captured in war. Yet still they were very different; and again it shows up very clearly in the nature of their social conflict, which did not run along class lines. Why was this? A fundamental difference between most societies of pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, including its centralized kingdoms, and those of Eurasia was that power crucially depended on the control, not of land *qua* economically scarce resource, but of people. Goody ([1971, 1976]) relates this to the basic conditions of agricultural production. Land was plentiful in relation to the size of the population, and the tools of farming – hoe and cutlass – were freely available extensions of human muscle-power. There was no use of draft animals, or the plough, and very little artificial irrigation. Agriculture was therefore extensive rather than intensive, typically using the bush-fallow system, where a piece of land adequate to the needs of the farming group was worked for a few years, till its natural fertility declined; it was then left to revert to bush to recover its fertility, while a fresh plot was cleared; and so on till the first plot was ready to be farmed again. If the farming group became larger, it just took more land into cultivation; while if there was any need to increase production, it had to increase its labour force. In sum, the scarce factor of production was not land but labour. Since it was people that communities and households sought to accumulate and retain, human fertility was the first objective in Yoruba dealings with their gods; and it was also the main prize in struggles both between and within communities. One far-reaching consequence of this situation was the widespread practice of polygamy, by which men competed to control the key reproductive resource – with chiefs and elders winning out at the expense of young and poor men.

As already noted, the institution of kingship was fundamental to the city-state culture of the Yoruba. The *oba*'s palace was the focus of the town's layout: a complex of buildings, courtyards and shrines set in an extensive walled enclosure, with the principal market in front of it. As a sacred king, the *oba* was the sacred point of articulation between his people and the gods, but it was as the head of the largest household in the state that he was the source of its political integration. The palace of a substantial kingdom was inhabited by a vast horde of royal wives (dozens of them), slaves, messengers, eunuchs, priests, functionaries, stranger-clients and other dependents. Close by were the com-

pounds of priests and craftsmen ministering to the palace's needs, and of many of the principal chiefs. "Chiefs" is the conventional English translation for what Yoruba call *ijoye* or *oloye*, holders of "titles" (*oye*). There were enormous variations in the detail of the title systems in different towns, but titles were always grouped and ranked in various ways. There was often a distinction between a group of senior titles, whose members formed the highest council of the town, and a larger number of more junior ones, concerned with military leadership. Some titles denoted offices in the palace organization or in cults or crafts closely associated with it, others the headship of the wards or quarters into which the town was divided. Most but not all titles were hereditary within particular lineages, though in some towns (especially in the south and east) they were in principle open to any prominent son of the town. In large towns, at least, there was also a line of female titles.

Through its chiefs the *ilu* summoned its human resources, to enable it to engage successfully in its regional environment by controlling trade routes, attracting strangers to settle, dominating its neighbours, taking slaves rather than losing its people to other *ilu*. Each chief had to guarantee the loyalty of his following – the members of his lineage, quarter, cult-group etc., as well as his own household and more purely personal clients – through effective representation of them at the centre, and redistribution to them from it. There was thus a systematic two-way reciprocity at work. At all levels, power depended on the control of people, which at the level of the male household-head meant marrying many wives, and so acquiring more children and affinal relations. This enabled a man to make more claims on the centre, perhaps enabling him to become a chief, which in turn made him a more eligible patron, and enabled him to marry yet more wives. But as dependents gave a man power, so it increased the numbers who looked to him as patron. The greatest accumulations of wealth by individuals were thus broken up by the proportionately greater numbers of those who had claims on them.

It follows that in the political conflict of Yoruba city-states, the prevailing cleavages were vertical ones, between factions, rather than horizontal ones, between classes. As an arrangement for the allocation of reproductive power that works to the disadvantage of young men – since it postpones the age at which they can marry and become social adults – polygamy may be seen as creating a horizontal stratification based on age; and certainly youth/elders antagonism

has been one of the most enduring bases of conflict in Yoruba, as in other African societies. But since youths could look forward to becoming elders themselves, it was a type of conflict with small potential for the structural change of the system which engendered it. Successful *ilu* contained many slaves – all of alien origin – who were especially concentrated in the households of the *oba* and chiefs. Despite their shared status, slaves were divided by their diverse origins, by the standing of their owner and the uses to which they were put, and by the stage that their social assimilation to the host community had reached. Some royal slaves were very powerful as agents and officials of their master (particularly at Oyo). Female slaves were largely absorbed as low-status additional wives of their owners, or passed on to be wives of their clients. The only significant slave uprising was that of northern Muslim slaves at Oyo in ca. 1817, which occurred under two exceptional conditions: there was the ideological factor of the preaching of the Sokoto *jihad*; and Oyo itself was starting to fall apart through factional struggles between the *Alafin* and some of his chiefs, with one of whom the slaves aligned themselves (Law [1977] 250-2).

So the endemic form of struggle in Yoruba *ilu* was between notables and factions to control the power and resources of the state. Between the *oba* and chiefs there was a complex pattern of rivalry and interdependence. The chiefs, endlessly seeking to aggrandize themselves, needed to exercise influence at the palace – thus enabling a capable *oba* to play them off against one another. But though the *oba* symbolized the town's prowess as a whole, it did not suit them collectively to let him get too powerful. The *oba* was elected from one of the segments of a vast royal lineage – typically the largest in the town – by the senior non-royal chiefs acting as "kingmakers". It is often said they would not elect someone who would dominate them, but individually they would each seek to have installed someone with whom they had good ties. But still an *oba*, having started as relatively weak and beholden to his electors, would tend to grow in power over the course of his reign. Those around him – intimates among the chiefs, favoured royal wives and their greedy kin, arrogant sons, ambitious slaves – would tend to exploit their connections with him, rise in his shadow and create a nexus of privilege in the state. But such periodic concentrations of power inevitably generated a backlash: those excluded from favoured access would scheme to reverse things, sometimes with violence. These movements did not tend towards structural change; they were rather the

normal cycles characteristic of the system. This precolonial pattern of Yoruba city-state politics has contributed not a little to the prevailing character of conflict – factional, communal and regional before anything else – in Nigeria since its independence.

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