

To Article XIII (“Ifẹ – origin of the Yoruba”)

This survey of previous theories concerning the origins of the Yoruba insists on the strong influence of ideology on African historiography: before independence, scholars thought that African societies were highly influenced by cultural inputs from the outside world, after independence this tendency was reversed by the insistence on internal factors of development. In spite of a number of valid cultural comparisons pointing out the existence of Mediterranean and Canaanite-Israelite culture traits among the Yoruba, authors of the colonial period supposed that these elements were transmitted from north to south by way of fanciful long-distance migrations for which there is no evidence in the historical records. Postcolonial scholarship on the other hand dismisses such unwarranted reconstructions, but instead of pursuing research in all directions it relies heavily on the results of archaeological excavations. For Ifẹ and the history of the Yoruba, the late medieval datings of archaeological sites and finds led to the conclusion that the emergence of towns and the state building process itself belong to this period. This new orthodoxy disregards the fact that nearly all the available dates are based on the strictly circumscribed excavations of art objects. Certainly, more relevant and ancient dates would have been obtained if it had been possible to extend archeological research to sites like the Palace, the temple of Ọbatala and the grove of Oduduwa in the middle of the town of Ifẹ.

A minor detail which needs to be corrected concerns the confusion between Yemoo, the partner of Ọbatala, and Yemoja, the great primordial goddess (1995b: 393-394). While the first can be equated with Anat, the partner of Baal, the second corresponds to Yamm and Tiamat, the great enemies of the weather-god (1999a: 107-116).