

THE YORUBA COMMUNITY IN ABIDJAN, 1942 – 2002

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Abstract

This paper historicizes the socio-economic activities of the Yoruba people in Abidjan. It highlights factors that contributed to the origin, growth and expansion of trading activities by the Yoruba in Abidjan. Data for the study were sourced from primary and secondary sources. This includes in-depth oral interviews with elements of Yoruba respondents living in Abidjan, personal and private records of individuals as well as reports from newspapers and other relevant information from books and journals related to the study. The Yoruba Community in Abidjan is a very vibrant socio-political and economic group of people living in Abidjan. Majority of the Yoruba inhabitants in the town were mainly traders selling different kinds of manufactured products within and outside Abidjan. Notable among such goods sold by the Yoruba traders includes tailoring materials and other accessories, food stuff either in cooked or raw forms, artisans, Transportation services, Cloth selling as well as alcoholic beverages etc. The paper established that Abidjan is an active commercial centre thriving for investment and businesses activity in the region. The relative peace, political stability and maintenance of law and order contributed greatly to make the city a conducive business environment for the Yoruba people in Abidjan.

Keywords: Abidjan, People, Traders, Socio-economic, Yoruba

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Introduction

The Yoruba speaking people are among the dispersed and widely travelled people in Nigeria after the Igbo ethnic groups. The migration of these Yoruba of Nigeria, especially within and outside the West African sub-region is a vital memory throughout the period covered in this study. Migration and economic activities have always gone hand in hand, and it is not a surprise that the traders among the Yoruba fueled the migration to Abidjan (Azeez 2015).

The trend of Yoruba movement to Abidjan was informed by economic anticipation from profitability, social constrains, political instability, security situation and other related factors as applicable to specific country in the sub-regions (Raji 2009). Indeed, for most of the traders, their ability to adapt to the rules and regulations of their host country (Abidjan), determined the possibility of the pattern of their settlement in Abidjan at independence and afterwards. The Yoruba from Nigeria represent an important alien commercial class. The much-acclaimed socio-economic fortune in Abidjan provided attraction to these groups from Nigeria including the Yoruba speaking groups from Ogbomoso, Osogbo, Saki, Igboho, Ejigbo and Oyo traders (Raji 2009). The study is a historical analysis of the Yoruba economic activities and settlement patterns in Abidjan, Ivory Coast in Francophone West African country. The year 1942 marked the peak period for the movement of many Yoruba people to settle and live in Abidjan for sustainability of their economic livelihoods. While the year 2002 was the period that the country was plunged into a civil war (Human Right Watch 2001) that lasted for two years, and Xenophobic attacks against non -Ivoriens in the city of Abidjan.

ORIGIN OF THE YORUBA COMMUNITY IN ABIDJAN

The exact date of the origin of the Yoruba people in Abidjan is vague. Hence it is difficult to state with precision when the Yoruba people began to settle and live in Abidjan. However, Raji and Adebayo maintained that by the 1930's elements from the Yoruba extract from Ijebu and Oyo provinces were already resident in Abidjan. In their submission, they observed that messages were sent by people from Ejigbo around 1942 to their kith and kin in Abidjan advising them to stay in Abidjan until after the World War II. Nigeria's Ambassador to Abidjan, Muhammad Maccido suggests that more than 80 percent of Nigerians resident in Abidjan are Yoruba. The Yoruba presence in Abidjan is as old as the history of Ivory coast when the country was colonized by France in the 19th century. They mainly came into the country as traders, artisans, and skilled workers and have been living peacefully with the host community.

A number of factors facilitated the movement of the Yoruba into Abidjan. These include amongst the others the anticipated profit margin that could be derived from their trading activities, seeking opportunities fortune in the newly established capital region of the French colony and the relative political and economic stability enjoyed by the newly independent country in Africa. In other instances, it is believed that Yoruba saw their migration as a means of departure from their homeland to avoid family conflicts and local burdens with their households (Raji 2009). This exemplifies the push-pull factor theory also known as the Lee's Migration model developed in 1966 (Lee 1966). It explains why people migrate from one place to another. It identifies two types of factors that influence migration, the push factors also known as the negative conditions include poverty, unemployment, low wages, political instability, natural disasters, pollution, poor living conditions , discriminations as well as lack of opportunities while the pull factors also in this instance positive conditions like better job opportunities, higher wages, improved living standard, political

stability, freedom as well as good living conditions with access to healthcare facility and functional educational system. This theory provides the understanding of the complex motivations behind the movement of the Yoruba people from Nigeria into Abidjan by acknowledging that the Yoruba people are driven by a combination of negative conditions (push factors) and attractive opportunities (pull factors) into the city of Abidjan.

The Yoruba in Abidjan settled in Treichville, Como, Bouddork, Marcory, Abobo, Grand Bassam, Bracodi, Dabou, Cocody and Abengourou had large number of Yoruba residence to support their economic livelihood. They organized themselves as a formidable social group promoting their language, culture and preserving their cultural heritage through traditional festivals, music and art. The people have a strong organizational structure, with leaders and associations focusing on the Yoruba welfare and interests (Raji 2009). Several Yoruba groups from Ejigbo, Ijebu, Oyo, and Ilorin people settled in different areas of Abidjan for their trading and business activity. The population of Yoruba people in Abidjan is uncertain. Hence, there is no reliable statistical data on the composition of ethnic Yoruba groups in the country. However, it is believed that the predominant ethnic Yoruba dwellers found in Abidjan were from Ejigbo, Ogbomoso, Ilorin, Ijebu, Igbomina, Lagos and Ibadan, all in Nigeria. Others include Ijebu, Egba, and Iwo groups.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF THE YORUBA IN ABIDJAN

The socio-economic activities of the Yoruba groups in Abidjan are most significant in the economic and cultural life of city. The Yoruba people in Abidjan engage in various socio-economic activities such as trade

and commerce, agriculture, industrial activities, offer services as well as enhancing the social and cultural activities of the city. The Yoruba traders are prominent in Abidjan market, selling goods like textiles, food items and electronics. Others engage in farming with the growing of crops like cassava, maize and vegetables to supply the local market. Also, Yoruba entrepreneurs are involving in small scale industries such as food processing, craftsmanship and construction. Similarly, the Yoruba offer services such as transportation, hospitality and healthcare thereby contributing to Abidjan economy. The Yoruba in Abidjan preserves their cultural heritage through the speaking of their language, traditional festivals and music and art performances (Raji 2009).

These activities demonstrate the Yoruba people’ entrepreneurial spirit, ‘cultural resilience, and contribution to Abidjan’s socio-economic life. With the establishment of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, it facilitated integration of trading activities among the people of the African Sub-region. Indeed, the productive trading activity of Yoruba settlers in the city has greatly enhanced the local economy of Abidjan (Adeniran 2017).



Plate I: Yoruba Central Popular Market, Temidire, Abidjan.

Source: Authors field work, March 2024.

With the ECOWAS principle of free movement of persons and goods, trading activity of nationals from other Countries who settled in Abidjan to trade in basic households and food items becomes rampant. In addition, services such as transportation, barbing and repairing of machines and equipment were also engaged by the Yoruba natives in Abidjan. The Yoruba dominated trading activities in the selling of textiles, tailoring materials, foodstuffs both raw and cooked foods, repairs, transportation, security jobs, dry cleaning as well as truck pushing both within and outside market (Adeniran 2017).

According to Adeniran, the policies of the late president Felix Houphouet Boigny favored the Yoruba migrants from Nigeria who were motivated to migrate into Abidjan. The Yoruba settlers were treated as citizens, not as immigrants by the government and people of Abidjan. They were given voting rights by government and also played notable roles in building of modern Ivorian nation. This partly explained the political stability enjoyed by the most famous Ivorian President Felix Houphouet Biogny, the county experienced remarkable growth in its export and trade relations amongst the people.

The Yoruba in Abidjan develop socio political structures to protect their businesses and economic interest; competition and rivalry between Yoruba and traders amongst themselves or with other Africans from other countries facilitate development of the Yoruba kingship structure in Abidjan with the exception of Yoruba trading activities and increased migrant of the population. The Yoruba developed a political structure of maintaining their tribal ancestry and built internal mechanism of resolving disputes and conflicts amongst themselves (Adeniran 2017). The Yoruba use their socio-cultural group as a means to resolve interpersonal disputes amongst one another as well as wining and dining with one another during ceremony/feast such as marriage ceremony,

naming ceremony and coronation of a recognized authority among the Yoruba leaders in Abidjan. The Yoruba were recognized as some distinct ethnic dwellers that were given a well-defined residential base and recognized ethnic chief. The authority of the chief was ultimately supported by the power of the president of Cote d'Ivoire. The formal recognition of the Yoruba socio-political organization enables the settlers consolidate gains in the control of their business (Cohen 1969). In Abidjan, the Yoruba people double themselves as a source of identity (a cultural unit) as well as an agency of power in Abidjan. What sustains the Yoruba groups is their history and traditions, habits in food, dressing, literature and music are put to good use to socialize members into the group, encourage marriage among group members, and generate a feeling of respect. Each generation processes a leadership that champions cause of ethnic groups and – other traditions to keep member of the group together (Falola 2003).

The main reason for the creation of the Yoruba kingship tradition in Abidjan has a political undertone. The Yoruba people developed the political system outside their homeland to unite the group settlers of the Yoruba descents, derive economic and political benefits, engage in cooperation, thrifts and credit society and fight for power and resources. According to Surajudeen, the Yoruba settlers created a political system suitable to their culture and practice in their homeland in Nigeria. The first Yoruba king popularly known in Abidjan as Oba Emmanuel Alabi was the first celebrated Oba in Abidjan from Ile Odunmoun, Ejigbo.

IMPACT OF THE YORUBA COMMUNITY IN ABIDJAN

The Yoruba community in Abidjan is one of the most organized ethnic dwellers living in the city. In size, the population of the Yoruba settlers is significantly high when compared to other ethnic dwellers from other different African nations living in the town. The Yoruba had made great impact on the formal and informal economy of the city. More importantly, the Yoruba migrant settlers in the town engage in the

formal sector of the economy through their involvement as judges, medical doctors, bankers as well teachers for the development of the country. Many others are found in the informal trading sectors like in the selling of food items, engaging in artisan work, transportation services, spare parts, selling plumbing materials and other vital household utensils.



Plate 2: Central Market, Temidire, Abidjan

Source: Authors field work, March 2024

In practice, Ivorians, tolerated and accommodated the Yoruba ethnic groups like all others from Sub-Saharan Africa living in the capital city of Abidjan. There are several reasons for this cordiality in Yoruba - Ivorian relations. The Yoruba constitute one of the oldest co-settlers in the town as far back as during the French Colonial rule in Abidjan.

Some of the Yoruba migrants' settlers who gave birth to their children in Abidjan claim citizenship rights in the country. These categories of people were allowed to work in the civil service and hold political offices and positions in the city after independence. Approximately, it is estimated that the population of Yoruba settlers in the city is close to forty percent of the total population of the country.



Plate 3: Popular Traditional Market, at Adjemen, Abidjan.
Source: Authors field work, March 2024.

The Yoruba population dominated the major markets found in the capital city of Abidjan and other regions in the country. The Yoruba were mainly found in the markets popularly known as Adjemen, Atecoube, Lackout, Trechville, Temidire, to mention but a few. Members of the Yoruba groups were recognized as market committees contributing to the coordinating of marketing activities and exchange of trade interactions. The local government officials of the different markets coordinated the collection of tax from the shop owners and

remit to the government. However, it is instructive to note that the Yoruba were not allowed to have market leaders like *Ìyál'òjà* (mother of the market) or *Babál'òjà* (father of the market) as in the practice of the Yoruba in their home country in Nigeria.



Plate 4: Traditional section of the Market trading in textile products Ajemen, Abidjan.

Source: Authors field work, March 2024.

The Yoruba had actively contributed to mosque building in many regions of Abidjan as well as the building of churches. Many religious associations from the Yoruba home country were also established in the town. Examples of this include the Ahl Sunnah Mosque at Berequete,

Temidire central mosque, to mention a few. This partly explained how Islam became popular among the people in the town. The Ivorians usually imitated some observable cultural practice found among the Yoruba especially in dressing, naming tradition and familial relations.



Plate 5: Ansar-Ud- Deen Central Mosque, Bremonville Abidjan
Source: Authors field work, March 2024.

Conclusion

It has been established from the foregoing the socio-economic activities of the Yoruba community in Abidjan from the 1940s to 2002. Throughout this period, the Yoruba were significantly one of the ethnic dwellers contributing greatly to trade and economic activities of Abidjan. Many of the Yoruba inhabitants' trade in manufactured goods, selling of raw and cooked food items, clothes, transportation services as well as alcoholic beverages. The Yoruba impact on the local economy of the country at large is recognized in both the formal and informal

sector of the economy. The Yoruba community is a driving force of the economic activity for investment and business activity in the region. The relative peace, political stability and maintenance of law and order contributed greatly to advance the cause of the Yoruba community in Abidjan.

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