

Argument for The Reclassification of Yoruba as A Language Isolate

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Mini Review

Whereas the uniquely tonal language of Yoruba is currently classified as belonging to one of the 'families' of African languages an argument can be made that this is a misnomer, made by patronizing European explorers and linguists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The principal reason Yoruba came to be thus classified was because of similarities European racists found between Yoruba and some other Nigerian/west African languages. Assuming sub-Saharan Africans had no history and had never set up kingdoms and colonies of their own it simply never occurred to these prejudiced Europeans and Americans that these other languages that so resembled Yoruba had been at some time colonized by the Yoruba and had borrowed syntax and words from the Yoruba. Here I present evidence that all the languages classed into the family of languages Yoruba is now classed into were once victims of Yoruba colonization. Next, I present evidence that The Yoruba language is indeed a language isolate.

At present many sources class Yoruba as being in the Kwa subgroup of the 'Niger Congo Family' or in the 'west Sudanic family'. This family consists of such languages as Twi, Asante and Fanti (spoken in Ghana), Ibo and nupe (spoken in Nigeria) and Ewe, Fon and Togo (spoken in Benin republic) [1]. Evidence that the speakers of these non-Yoruba languages were victims of Yoruba colonization abound viz- "The Oyo Empire dominated during its apogee (1650-1750AD) most of the countries between the Volta River (Burkina Faso) in the west and Niger River (Nigeria) in the east" [2] "The Oyo Empire, established by The Yoruba people, controlled a wide area between the Volta (Burkina Faso) and Niger Rivers (Nigeria) by the mid-17th Century" [3]. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica 1990 Edition: "Oyo subjugated the kingdom of Dahomey in the west in two phases (1724-1730, 1738-1748)" [4].

The History of West Africa 1700-1800 states- "Much of the area of modern Dahomey (Benin Republic) seems to have come within the domain of the Yoruba Empire. Sango is said to have conquered the popo (perhaps as we have seen, in the 14th or 15th century). An

Alaafin of Oyo is said to have ruled in the area in the 16th century. Thus by 1600 there was still considerable cultural contact between people in the Dahomey area and the Yoruba of both Oyo and Ife. The Yoruba language was understood and used right along the coast to the frontiers of modern Ghana. The kingdom of Allada, or Ardrah, which exercised authority over the Aja peoples of the coast, shared to a very large extent Yoruba civilization [5]- "An Empire of this type, with Oyo as its centre thus extended over most of western Nigeria, as far as the lower Niger in the east, to the west as far as far as Atakpame in Togo, while in the north it controlled Nupe and Borgu. [6] By 1400 The Yoruba were already organized in a complex system of city states. In the 18th century Oyo exacted tribute from Dahomey, which it first invaded and devastated 1726-1730. [7]

Table 1: Morphing of non-Yoruba languages.

Yoruba	Benin	Igala	Idoma	West Igbo	Ewe	Fon
ogbe	ogbi	ebi	ebi	ogbi	gbe	gbe
oyeku	ako	aku	akwu	akwu	yeku	Yeku
iwori	oghori	ogoli	ogoli	woli	oli	yeku
odi	odi	oji	odi	odi	di	di
iressun	oruhu	Oloru	olo	ulushu	losu	looso
owara	oghae	egali	egali	ogai	noli	nwele
obara	ovba	obata	obla	obai	abla	abala
okanran	oka	okara	okla	okai	akla	akana
ogunda	eghita	ejita	ejita	Ejita	guda	guda
osa	oha	ora	ola	osha	sa	sa
ika	eka	eka	eka	eka	ka	ka
oturupon	erhowa	Atunuk-pa	Etruk-pa	atokpa	truk-pe	truk-pe
otuwa	eture	otula	otre	etile	tula	tula
irete	ete	ete	ete	ete	lete	ete
ose	ose	oce	oce	ose	tse	che
ofun	ohu	ofu	ofu	ofu	fu	fu

'The central area of Yoruba settlement was characterized by the presence of unusually large towns inhabited by agriculturists, craftsmen and traders. The subjects of the Alaafin must have outnumbered many times that of any other ruler.' [8] 'Oyo became the most powerful West African kingdom in the 17th and 18th century' [9]. Below we see a clear example of the 'morphing' of non-Yoruba languages under Yoruba influence, precisely as it relates to Ifa -the Yoruba oracle [10]. In the Yoruba language every syllable corresponds to one of the first three notes of the tonic sol-fa/major scale i.e. doh-rah-me (d, r, m). It is impossible to utter a word in the Yoruba language without the word having syllables corresponding precisely to doh, ray or me. Hence the famous Yoruba 'talking drums' (gangan etc). What other language on planet earth has this characteristic? This tonic solfa feature of course results in several words having exactly the same spelling but entirely different sounds and meanings, viz-

- i. Kolokolo (m, m, m, m) =stealthily
- ii. Kolokolo (m, r, d, r) =circuitously
- iii. Kolokolo (d, d, m, m) =muddy, miry
- iv. Kolokolo (d, d, d, d) =fox [11] Also,
- v. Oko (r,r) =husband, -with accent below both vowels
- vi. Oko (r,r) =farm, -with no accent below either vowel
- vii. Oko (r, m) =hoe, - with accent below both vowels
- viii. Oko (r, m) =penis, - with no accent below either vowel
- ix. Oko (d,d) =spear
- x. Oko (r,d) -vehicle, -with accent below both vowels
- xi. Oko (r,d) =stone, - no accent below either vowel

Words like these abound in Yoruba, too numerous to state here. What other language on planet earth has this characteristic? Apart from the doh reh mi feature the vowels 'e' and 'o' have accented and unaccented forms (as shown above). Imagine if the speakers of the 'click' languages of southern Africa had colonized the Zulu, Xhosa, Shona, Swana etc. -and these other languages had taken up some element of clicking. Imagine if Europeans had arrived in South Africa and didn't know of when Zulus etc. had been colonized by Khoisan or speakers of the click languages. They would have concluded that Zulu, Xhosa, Shona etc. were in the 'click family' instead of concluding that the click language was a language isolate.

This is exactly what happened in Nigeria with the musical/tonal Yoruba language. In conclusion I declare that Yoruba is a language isolate and its classification as a member of the 'Niger Congo' family etc. is a relic from the racist stereotypes of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The sooner this misnomer is rectified in textbooks and other media worldwide the better.

Not All Bad

Funnily enough, the Encyclopedia Britannica 1902 version showed unusual tolerance and objectivity for its time by hinting Yoruba was fundamentally different from the languages of the surrounding tribes- "Before the introduction of letters the Yoruba's are said to have employed knotted strings, like the Peruvian quipus, for recording events of historic interest. Their language, which has been reduced to writing and carefully studied by Crowther, Bouche, Bowen and other missionaries, is spoken with considerable uniformity throughout the whole of the Yoruba domain, and has even penetrated with the enterprising native traders as far east as Kano in the Haussa country beyond the Niger. The best-known dialectic varieties are those of Egba, Jebu Ondo, Ife, Llorin, and Oyo (Yoruba proper, called also Nago); but the discrepancies are slight, while the divergence from the conterminous linguistic groups (Ewe in the west, Ibo, Nupe, and others in the east) appears to be fundamental." [12].

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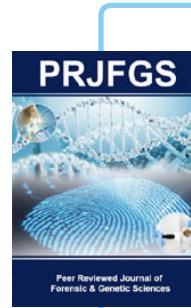
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