

# YORUBA

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

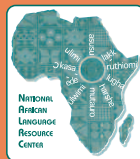
Yoruba is the first language of approximately 30 million West Africans, and is spoken by populations in Southwestern Nigeria, Togo, Benin and Sierra Leone. It is also one of the prominent languages and cultures of the diaspora, and greatly impacts the social, cultural and religious lives of millions of people in countries outside Africa, such as Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago and Haiti. Yoruba culture, which centers around religion, is one of the surviving African elements in these countries, as one can clearly see in the orisa tradition, candomblé and the feature of syncretism in Brazil, as well as in other religious practices in the United States and elsewhere.

While not all Yoruba practice traditional Yoruba religion, it continues to play a major role in the lives of many Yoruba. Traditional Yoruba religion is centered on a pantheon of deities called *òrìṣà*. When a child is born, a diviner, or *babaláwo*, will be consulted to determine which *òrìṣà* the child should follow. As adults, the Yoruba often honor several of these deities. According to oral tradition, the high god, Olórun (Olo'du'mare'), asked O'r'i.s'a'la' to descend from the sky to create the first Earth at Ile-Ife. O'r'i.s'a'la' was delayed and his younger brother, Oduduwa', accomplished the task. Shortly afterwards, sixteen other 'or'i.s'a' came down from heaven to create human beings and live on Earth with him. The descendants of each of these deities are said to have spread Yoruba culture and religious principles throughout the rest of Yorubaland.

## STUDYING YORUBA IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some universities in the United States that currently offer Yoruba. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>

Boston University  
Cornell University  
Georgia Southern University  
Howard University  
Hunter College  
Indiana University  
Lincoln University  
Michigan State University  
Ohio State University  
Rutgers University  
Tulane University  
University of California, Berkeley  
University of California, San Diego  
University of Florida, Gainesville  
University of Georgia, Athens  
University of Iowa  
University of Pennsylvania  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Wilberforce University, Ohio  
Yale University



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TWIN GIRLS IN YORUBA ATTIRE

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# WHY STUDY YORUBA?

Students cite many reasons for studying Yoruba, including personal interest in West African cultures, research interests and fulfillment of foreign language requirements. African-American students often study Yoruba out of interest in their own heritage, since many of the slaves brought to North America during the 18th and 19th centuries came from Yoruba-speaking areas.

For students of comparative linguistics and socio-linguistics, a study of Yoruba can help and yield astounding results through an examination of the various changes and differences that occur between the language and the culture in the home base on the one hand and the diaspora on the other. Students of African literatures would also benefit from studying Yoruba language, literature and culture, as many notable African writers, such as Wole Soyinka, are Nigerians. Further, Yoruba is one of the most studied and researched African languages. There are already two volumes of Yoruba Metalanguage, and Yoruba is now being used for serious academic discourses such as Masters and Ph.D. degree theses in some parts of Africa. Its importance as an African language cannot be overemphasized.

Due to the number of people for whom Yoruba is the first language, the political, cultural and social importance of the language within Africa, and the United States' national interests tied to economic and diplomatic relations with Yoruba-speaking areas, Yoruba was recognized among the Less Commonly Taught Languages as a first priority language by a national panel of African language teachers.

# WHO SPEAKS YORUBA?

## PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The term Yoruba describes a number of semi-independent peoples loosely linked by geography, language, history and religion. The Yoruba live primarily in Nigeria and some parts of Benin, Togo and Sierra Leone. They have resided in cities for many hundreds of years and are among the most urbanized people in Africa. Ibadan, located in southern Nigeria, is one of the oldest and largest black cities in Africa with a population estimated at well over 5 million. Yoruba cities formed the political centers of city-states governed by a king and supreme council. In pre-colonial times each city-state was autonomous and had its own distinct dialect, religious cults and army. These ancient states frequently warred with one another, and several centuries ago one of these kingdoms, Oyo, became dominant. Old Oyo, as this state is called, gave cohesiveness to Yoruba custom and contributed greatly to the collective identity of modern Yoruba-speaking people.

Today, however, a Yoruba will often call himself or herself “Ib`ada`n” or “I`j`e.bu” rather than Yoruba in order to emphasize his or her local identity. There are more than fifty traditional Yoruba city-states recognized today. Though their domains have been absorbed into the government of the modern nation of Nigeria, traditional kings often have considerable local and national political power.



A traditional Yoruba  
*Oba* (king)



A woman in Yoruba attire.



Guests flank the bride and groom at a traditional Yoruba wedding in Nigeria



Yoruba students participate in a skit