

THE YORUBA LANGUAGE

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Can you guess the origin of the *Yoruba* language? The universe has birthed a variety of lingos and the Yoruba language is just one out of many; but definitely distinctly unique in its own way.

The Yoruba language as most researchers have purported is a member of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. This language is estimated to be spoken by almost 5.3 million people, most of whom live in Nigeria, in west Africa.

However, there are also some scattered groups of Yoruba speaking individuals in Benin Republic and Togo, which are geographically smaller countries to the west of Nigeria.

Although the official language of Nigeria is English, “**Yoruba**” is considered one out of three of the major local languages of the Nigerian people along with “**Igbo**” and “**Hausa**”.

Let's Talk Dialects!

Did you know that virtually every language in the world has dialects,(i.e. Varieties of the same language that are particular to a certain group of speakers)? Dialects vary by region and by social group, and this applies to the Yoruba language. Interestingly, even though Yoruba has many dialects, its speakers can all understand one another

These dialects according to language scholars have been grouped into three major geographic dialect areas characterised by major differences in pronunciation, and, to a lesser degree, in grammar and vocabulary. These three divisions are:

- ❖ Northwest Yoruba
- ❖ Southeast Yoruba
- ❖ Central Yoruba

A Dive Into the Life of the Yoruba Speaking Majority

According to researchers, the Yorubas make up one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, and have survived for centuries on the African continent. Within Nigeria, the Yorubas dominate the western part of the country.

A popular Yoruba **myth** holds that all Yoruba people descended from a heroic deity known as Oduduwa. Today, studies show that there are over fifty individuals who claim kingship as descendants of Oduduwa..

More so, during the centuries of the slave trade, the Yoruba territory was said to be known as the “Slave Coast”. Quite a number of Yorubas were taken to the United States where they were enslaved.

Religious Practice

Did you know that about 20 percent of the Yorubas still practice the traditional religions of their ancestors? The practice of traditional religion varies from community to community. A typical example as stated by everyculture.com states that a deity may be male in one village, and female in another.

Furthermore, the Yoruba traditional religion holds that there is one supreme being and hundreds of or minor deities also called “*orisha*”.

Researchers have identified some popular gods who are available to all Yoruba worshipers who choose to believe in the existence of a deity. These gods include **Olorun** (Sky God) the high god, the Creator. It is believed that worshipers of Olorun may call on him with prayers or by pouring water on kola nut on the ground.

Eshu (also called Legba by some) is the divine messenger who delivers sacrifices to Olorun after they are placed at his shrine.

Ifa is the god of Divination, who interprets the wishes of Olorun to mankind. Worshipers of Ifa turn to him in times of trouble.

Ogun (god of war), considered one of the most important. In Yoruba courts, people who follow traditional beliefs swear to give truthful testimony by kissing a machete sacred to Ogun.

Shango (also spelt Sango and Sagoe) is the deity that creates thunder. The Yorubas, especially the worshipers of this god believe that when thunder and lightning strikes, Shango has thrown a thunderstone to earth. After a thunderstorm, the religious leaders search the ground for the thunderstone, which is believed to have special powers. The stones are housed in shrines dedicated to Shango.

The Yoruba who practice other religions are divided about evenly between Muslims (followers of Islam) and Christians (followers of Christ). Nearly all Yorubas still observe annual festivals and other traditional religious practices.

Language Status

In Southwest Nigeria where most Yoruba speakers are concentrated, Yoruba, although not an official language, is used in government administration, print and electronic media, at all levels of education, in literature and in film.

Code-switching between Yoruba and English is a way of life for educated Yoruba-English bilinguals. Yoruba is used mainly in the family setting and informal situations such as village or tribal meetings. The use of standard English mostly happens in very official situations. In informal situations, a creolised form of English dubbed “Yorubanglish” is used. “Yorubanglish” is simply a blend of both English and Yoruba grammar and vocabulary.

Living Conditions

Even though the world is now more civilised, there are still some traditional compounds in certain Yoruba villages that are made up of rectangular courtyard, each with a single entrance.

Around each courtyard is an open or a partly enclosed porch. Here the women sit and cook. Behind this are the rooms of each adult.

However, today the old compounds are rapidly being replaced by modern bungalows or storey buildings made of cement blocks with corrugated iron roofs. Most Yoruba towns have adequate basic amenities, like electricity, running water, and good roads.

So You Want to Visit the Yoruba Land!

If you are planning a trip to any of the Yoruba speaking provinces, be it in Nigeria, Benin Republic or Togo, you definitely want to learn a few ways to communicate with the people. Check out these few common words and phrases in Yoruba you might need to use:

<i>Ba wo ni.</i>	How are you?
<i>O da bo.</i>	Goodbye
<i>E jo.</i>	Please
<i>O se.</i>	Thank you.
<i>Bee ni.</i>	Yes.
<i>ra ra</i>	No.
<i>Ema binu</i>	I'm sorry/Don't be angry
<i>Ekaaaro</i>	Good morning

Did You Know...

The 2018 film titled “Bigger than Africa” Produced and Directed by Toyin Ibrahim Adekeye, the Nigerian-born, Los Angeles filmmaker was a film centred on Yoruba, the religion, cultural heritage and ethnicity of a part of the Beninese, Nigerian and Togolese Populations, as well as the descendants of slaves with origins in these countries.

Spread across the Western world by the slave trade routes, Yoruba has become a staple in the various states in America, where it is practised, celebrated and passed on to this day.

Meanwhile, the link to the roots in West Africa also remains sustained. Toyin Ibrahim in this film was able to create an eye-opening portrait of the Yoruba world across the continents.

Made with a special emphasis on the local Yoruba communities, including Oyotunji, the first African village in the United States, the film is a source of pride and joy of recognition for the Yorubas worldwide.

Enjoyed reading about the Yoruba language? There's more where this came from. Click [HERE](#) to learn about more languages.

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