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*The Yoruba Frontier:  
A Regional History of Community Formation,  
Experience, and Changes in West Africa*  
Aribidesi Usman



# The Yoruba Frontier

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*A Regional History of  
Community Formation, Experience,  
and Changes in West Africa*

Aribidesi Usman

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS  
Durham, North Carolina

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Usman, Aribidesi Adisa.

The Yoruba frontier : a regional history of community formation, experience, and changes in West Africa / Aribidesi Usman.

p. cm. -- (African world series)

“This book combines a series of previously published and unpublished papers and field notes.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59460-384-6 (alk. paper)

1. Yoruba (African people)--Nigeria--History. 2. Yoruba (African people)--History. 3. Nigeria--History--To 1851. 4. Nigeria--History--1851-1899. 5. Frontier and pioneer life--Africa, West. I. Title. II. Series: Carolina Academic Press African world series.

DT515.45.Y67U86 2011

966.9'00496333--dc23

2011033551

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS  
700 Kent Street  
Durham, North Carolina 27701  
Telephone (919) 489-7486  
Fax (919) 493-5668  
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

*This book is dedicated to  
the memory of late Professor Ade Obayemi*





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# Series Editor's Preface

The *Carolina Academic Press African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola  
University of Texas at Austin





# Preface

This book combines a series of previously published and unpublished papers and field notes. The published papers appeared mostly in journals and edited volumes. The rationale behind putting all of these scattered pieces of information into a single volume is to reach a larger audience. The book is intended for scholars and students interested in the precolonial history of Africa and the dynamics of change in small-scale societies of Africa. This book is also for libraries to put in their collections for readers at all levels, and for those among the general public who want to gain some insights about regional events in Yorubaland prior to the establishment of European rule.

My foray into studying societies located on the periphery or frontier of large empires and states began in 1987 during my graduate (Master's degree) program at the University of Ibadan, at the encouragement of the late Professor Ade Obayemi, then Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Today, I have no regret for taking this challenge. It has become increasingly clear in recent times that the historical dynamics of large African states, kingdoms, and empires cannot be adequately explained without a thorough understanding of their hinterland village communities. Northern Yorubaland is historically a frontier zone, an area inhabited by ethnically diverse communities. My research has been to document the Yoruba frontier experience and the dynamic relationships among the various groups in the past. This work engages archaeology, history, ethnohistory, ethnography, archival (mostly colonial) sources, and the rich oral traditions that provide valuable historical information. How did these frontier communities respond to external intrusions, and what repercussions did these have on their sociopolitical institutions? As frontier communities, the northern Yoruba people were both beneficiaries and/or victims of region-wide and global events. The research entails painstakingly collecting data relevant for understanding these vexing issues revolving around the frontier, politics, ethnicity, and class that have shaped modern-day relationships in Africa and beyond.

I present this book with the hope of a constructive criticism. I have tried to follow the standards of scholarship to which I have been trained—anthro-

pology, archaeology, and history. This work was faced with a number of challenges which may have affected the outcome of this book. First, early research work in northern Yoruba was very selective both in the subject matter and in locality. Second, there were insufficient funds to meet the various demands of archaeological work in northern Yoruba. However, I stand by my interpretations in this book, though I am fully aware that such interpretations are influenced by my own experiences, background, and theoretical orientation. I hope that readers (students, scholars, the general public) will have opportunity to read this book, discuss it, and come to their own conclusions or interpretations. It is highly expected that future scholars will be able to build on this work and make it better.

I would like to thank those who have directly or indirectly influenced the success of this work. First, Toyin Falola has been an inspiration to me and to countless other academics both in the United States and Africa. He always emphasizes that if you are in academics, you should be the best scholars you can be, and never lose focus. His annual Africa conferences have provided forums for presenting my research, exchanging ideas, and receiving feedback on a number of subjects. I am also indebted to Funso Afolayan who took time from his busy schedule to read the entire early draft of this manuscript and offer important criticisms and suggestions. I know he would be wondering why this manuscript has not been published since. I am to blame for this delay, and also if this book does not fully answer some of his important criticisms. I would also like to thank Hakeem Tijani for reading the proposal for this book years ago and for offering encouragement and suggestions. I know he is likely to have forgotten having read the proposal.

Also, I would like to thank some of my professional colleagues here in the United States and Nigeria who have either offered advice or suggestions on this work or have directly participated in my research work. First, Akin Ogundiran has been a great friend. His advice and suggestions on this work in its early stage have been most beneficial. Jonathan Aleru and Raphael Alabi of the Department of Archaeology/Anthropology, University of Ibadan, have participated in some of my archaeological work in northern Yoruba. I owe them a big appreciation. I must also acknowledge my local crew members in Nigeria who made my research possible from day to day during the various field seasons. In particular, Kayode Adewusi (my able photographer) and Johnson Ajayi (a.k.a. Ajike), both staff of the National Museum, Esie, have accompanied me to several archaeological sites, villages, and towns in northern Yoruba. Others are Olajide Lawal, Rasheed Lawal (Baba Ruka), Waheed Olatunji, and a host of others whose names I cannot remember. The insights, loyalty, and partnership they provided during the period were fundamentally important to the success of this project.

In northern Yoruba, my greatest debt remains to the local people and their rulers for the support, cooperation, the rich information they provided, and for allowing us into their homes and their old sites. The enthusiasm of the people seems to be related to community understanding of the benefits of our research to their localities. The elders and chiefs of the local communities generally see historical information dealing with the past as having the capacity to resolve potential frictions between communities, restructure traditional sociopolitical imbalance, and provide needed development in the region. As an indigenous anthropologist, I always find myself in this complicated situation: how best to convey my intention and still retain the trust and respect of the local people?

Finally, I am especially thankful for the financial backing provided by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for my dissertation and post-doctoral researches. The grants allowed me to make several trips to the archaeological fields, villages, and archives in Nigeria.

Whatever errors remain in this book, they are all mine, and you are free to make suggestions for any future changes.