

# Information about the Yoruba

**Directions:** Read the information about the Yoruba carefully. Then, use the information to brainstorm ideas for your diagram. Make sure your diagram contains visuals for each of the key aspects of life.



*The Yoruba kingdom, or Yorubaland, contained large cities and small towns and villages, all of which had an allegiance to a common king. The Yoruba were a heterogeneous people who spoke a variety of related dialects. Over the course of the nineteenth century, English became an important language in the area due to increased trade with the British.*

## Location and Environment

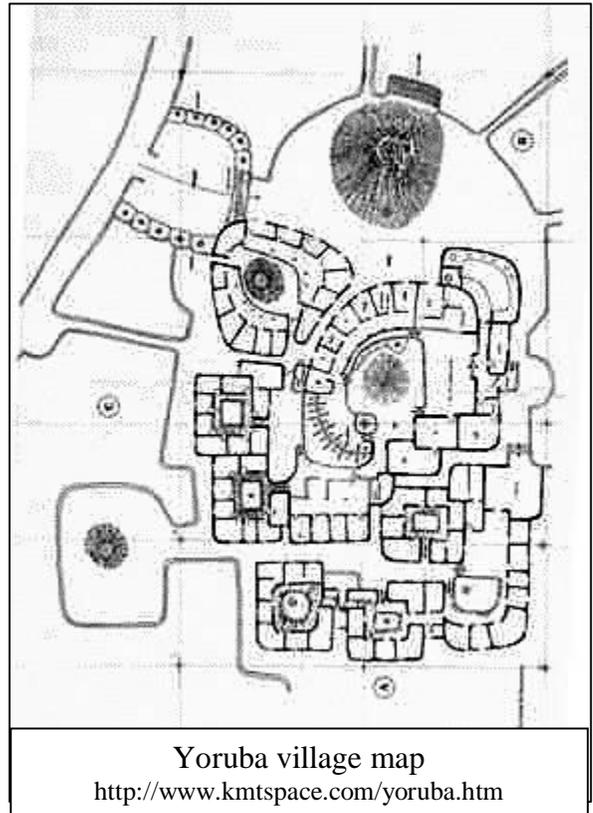
The Yoruba kingdom covered most of southwestern Nigeria. Its boundaries were the River Volta to the west, the Niger River to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. The climate was tropical; hot and wet, and they had large areas of rainforests.

## Shelter, Food, and Clothing

The Yoruba lived in cities, towns, and villages, all of which were surrounded by mud walls with large gates.

Yoruba houses varied in size, since each contained an entire extended family. The square homes, built of mud and had thatched roofs, were divided into small apartments. Each apartment was occupied by a single family member. Individuals could decorate their rooms however they wanted to. The family's animals slept outside the apartments under the overhanging roofs.

Corn, yams, potatoes, and peas were the most important foods for the Yoruba. A popular corn dish was made by pounding, soaking, and grinding corn and then boiling it to look much like pudding. Yams were usually boiled, pounded into dough, and served with a sauce. Meat dishes, usually goat, chicken, or fish were popular with people who had the money for meat. In cities, Yoruba often bought their meals from women street vendors rather than cooking it themselves.



Yoruba village map

<http://www.kmtspace.com/yoruba.htm>

Yoruba wore loose, flowing clothing. Men and women wore pants or robes of varying lengths, covered with either a large shawl or a long gown. Men usually shaved their heads and wore caps of a variety of styles and fabrics: pointed or rounded, cotton, velvet, or silk. Women wore jewelry made of copper, brass, and coral. Some men and women were decorated with scars and facial markings.



## Political Organization

Cities and towns had their own local governments. Each town was ruled by a local chief, a position that was usually passed from father to son. In addition to the chief, towns also had councils of elders. The influence of these councils varied from town to town. The chief, and sometimes the elders, were in charge of settling local arguments and legal complaints.

The cities, towns, and villages of the Yoruba were all ruled by one king. The king was a powerful ruler and sometimes was strict and severe. The position of king was passed down from father to son. The Yoruba kingdom received taxes from surrounding peoples.

The king's power depended upon the patriotic feelings and loyalty of the people, and he ruled distant areas by keeping a balance of power between local chiefs. Feelings of loyalty to the king decreased over time. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local governments were more powerful than the central government led by the king. Fierce disputes developed between different Yoruba chiefs, sometimes leading to wars. This fighting caused the power of the Yoruba kingdom to decrease.

## Family Structure



Yoruba family

<http://stylesubstancesoul.com/2011/06/talking-about-polygamy-with-lola-shoneyin-author-of-the-secret-lives-of-the-four-wives/>

Yoruba families went beyond the immediate, or nuclear, family. Each Yoruba belonged to an extended family unit which included a man, his wives, their children, his brothers, their wives and children, one or two elderly family members. It might also include a servant or a slave, if the family was wealthy. The oldest male member of the extended family was the family head. He was responsible for leading family meetings and settling disputes between family members.

Most men married more than one woman, while women married only one man. This practice is called polygamy. Yoruba marriages were arranged by the families of the bride and groom. Girls often became engaged very early in life. The engagement,

arranged during the bride's childhood, would last until the bride was old enough to marry at 16 years old. Wedding ceremonies were three-day celebrations in which friends and relatives gathered for feasting and singing. For the first two days, the bride was kept away from the guest. On the third day, the bride joined the groom for a final day of celebration. The couple then went to live in the groom's home.

Yoruba children learned through observing their parents and other adults around them. Girls were taught cleaning, weaving, trading, food preparation, gardening, and childcare from their mothers. Boys were trained as farmers by their fathers, or were taught a craft. Telling jokes and stories with moral lessons was a common social activity among adults and was imitated by children. Age brought great honor and respect within Yoruba society. When a person became too old to work, that family member was cared for by his or her sons.

## Religion/Belief System

The Yoruba believed in one supreme god, called *Olodumare*, the creator and owner of all things. They also worshipped thousands of less powerful gods who were in charge of things like fertility, love, hunting, disease, creativity, and change. They believed that the gods watched over them and would punish or reward them based on their behavior.

Yoruba communities came together for major religious events and festivals. These festivals were held to worship important gods and for weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals. For example, during naming ceremonies, family and friends gave names to a newborn to express their feelings toward him or her. Similarly, most people in the community played a role in funerals. Before a burial, the body was wrapped in cloth and then carried through the town. The body was buried at the house of the deceased. Then for several days, the family held a festival in honor of the dead family member.

## Economy

Yoruba economy was based on agriculture and trade. Wealthy people, market traders, and craftspeople lived in the cities. Those people set up trade guilds (associations) each with its own leader. People who lived in smaller towns and villages raised animals (such as sheep, goats, cows, and dogs) and worked on the land. They grew food for their own use as well as supplying food to the urban people.

In towns and villages, Yoruba men were responsible for the bulk of the farming, as well as for weaving cloth and sewing. The lifestyle of the Yoruba farmer was rigorous. Farmers often walked a few hours from the towns to reach their farms, where they worked six to eight hours each day. The Yoruba grew a variety of crops, including beans, peas, okra, sugar cane, rice, yams, potatoes, cotton, and sorghum (a grain). Women were responsible for cooking, selling clothing, carrying wood and water for the household, dyeing cloth, pounding oil from palm nuts, creating pottery, and weaving. They also helped in the fields at harvest time.

Communication between towns was strong due to frequent trade in art and agricultural products. Hundreds of thousands of people were involved in vast networks of local, regional, and international trade. Yoruba towns often specialized in the production of a certain product, such as salt, oil, cotton, indigo, cloth, or kola nuts. Locally, women sold produce and crafts in lively markets, where cowries (seashells) were used for money. Internationally, the Yoruba exported goods such as palm oil, cotton, and ivory. The more numerous imported goods included prints, cloth, silk, velvet, crockery, tin, knives, beads, tobacco, and gin.

