

CALLOPE
COLLECTOR'S EDITION

A Goodies Inc. Publication

The
Yoruba of
West Africa



February 1998 **CALLIOPE** WORLD HISTORY FOR KIDS

Rosalie F. Baker, Charles F. Baker
Editors

Denise L. Babcock
Managing Editor

Patricia Silvestro
Editorial Assistant

Ann Dillon
Art Director

Nancy Driscoll
Designer

Stephen L. Thompson
Copy Editor

Cobblestone Publishing Company

Malcolm C. Jensen, Publisher
Cathy Irving, Assistant Business Manager
Beth Wolfson, Fulfillment Assistant
Manuela A. Meier, Marketing Manager
Robyn Manley, Circulation Manager
Linda A. McNamee, Customer Service Manager
Deborah A. LaPointe, Customer Service

Advisory Board

Diane L. Brooks, Ed.D.
Administrator
Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional
Resources Office
California Department of Education

Ken Burns
Florentine Films

David Herbert Donald
Charles Warren Professor
of American History, Emeritus
Harvard University

Ross E. Dunn
Professor of History
San Diego State University

Barbara Elleman
Editor, Book Links
American Library Association

Martha S. Joukowsky
Professor
Center for Old World Archaeology and Art and the
Department of Anthropology
Brown University

Director
Brown University The 'Great' Temple Excavations at
Petra, Jordan

P. Ann Kaupp
Anthropology Outreach Office
National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution

Heidi Roupp
President
World History Association

CALLIOPE is pronounced Kuh LIE o pee.
In ancient Greek and Roman mythology,
Calliope was the Muse of epic poetry
and eloquence. The ancients honored
the Muses as the goddesses of the arts
and sciences.

Consulting Editor

Dr. Wande Abimbola was born in Oyo, Nigeria, in 1932.
He was consecrated as a babaláwo (Ifá priest) in 1971 and
installed as Àwíṣe Àgbáyè (spokesperson of Ifá priests in
the world) in 1981. Abimbola has a B.A. in History from
the University of London, a M.A. in Linguistics from
Northwestern University, and a Ph.D. in literature from
the University of Lagos. He has taught at many colleges
and universities, including the University of Lagos, the
University of Ilé-Ife, Indiana University, Amherst College,
and Harvard University. He is currently a professor at
Boston University. From 1982 to 1989, Abimbola was the
President of the University of Ilé-Ife and, from 1992 to
1993, he was the Senate Majority Leader of the Senate of
the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

CALLIOPE would also like to thank **J. Lorand Matory**, the
Hugh K. Foster Associate Professor of Anthropology and
Afro-American Studies at Harvard University, Cambridge,
Massachusetts, and to **John Pemberton III**, a professor of
Religion at Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, for
their help with the issue. A special thanks to John
Pemberton III for the photos he provided.

ABOUT THE COVER: The sculptors of ancient Ifé
created works of art that include this magnificent
"bronze" head. (©The British Museum)



**A 1995 Parents' Choice
Honor Winner**

**George Washington Honor Medal
Award Winner**



Abstracted and indexed in Primary Search
and Magazine Article Summaries
Member: Classroom Publishers Association

CALLIOPE (ISSN 1050-7086) is published monthly except June, July, and August by Cobblestone Publishing Company, 30 Grove Street, Suite C, Peterborough, NH 03458. Telephone: (603) 924-7209. Volume Eight, Number Six. Copyright 1998 by Cobblestone Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Reproduction of the whole or any part of the content is illegal without written permission from the publisher. Periodicals postage paid at Peterborough, NH, and at additional mailing offices. (USPS 000-943.) Nine issues (one year) \$26.95; \$8.00 additional per year outside U.S. Canadians, please add 7% GST (GST# 130428204). Please remit in U.S. funds. For SUBSCRIPTIONS, CHANGE OF ADDRESS, and ADJUSTMENTS, write to CALLIOPE, 30 Grove Street, Suite C, Peterborough, NH 03458. Editorial correspondence to Editorial Department, CALLIOPE, 30 Grove Street, Suite C, Peterborough, NH 03458. Please give both new address and old address as printed on last label. Allow six to eight weeks for change of address. POSTMASTER: Please send change of address to CALLIOPE, 30 Grove Street, Suite C, Peterborough, NH 03458. Printed in the United States of America.

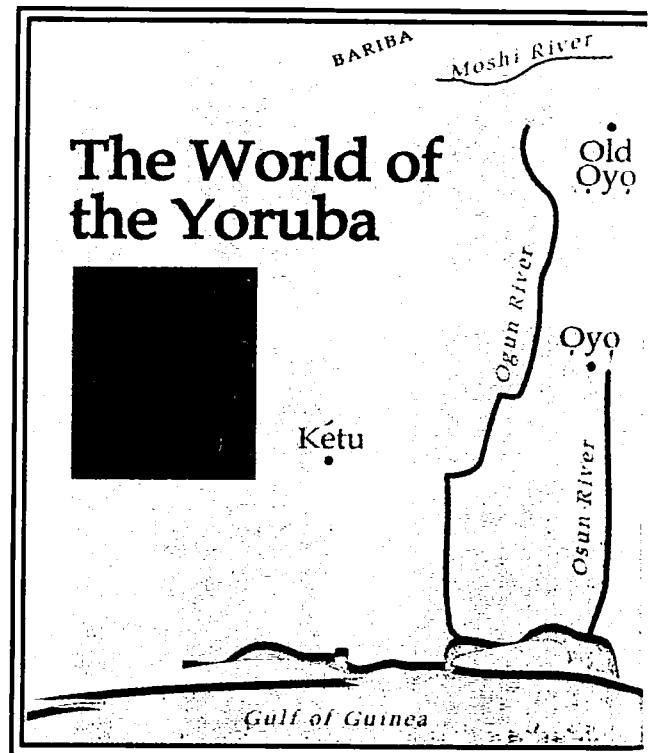
YORUBA

A World C

by J. Lorand Matory

Twenty to twenty-five million speakers of the Yoruba language live in southwestern Nigeria, the neighboring People's Republic of Benin, and Togo. In the 1700s and 1800s, their ancestors lived in dozens of highly urbanized kingdoms and republics, where they spoke Ijebu, Ekiti, Ondo, Oyo, Egba, and other language varieties that are now called "dialects," or sub-languages, of Yoruba. These dialects, however, have many words and

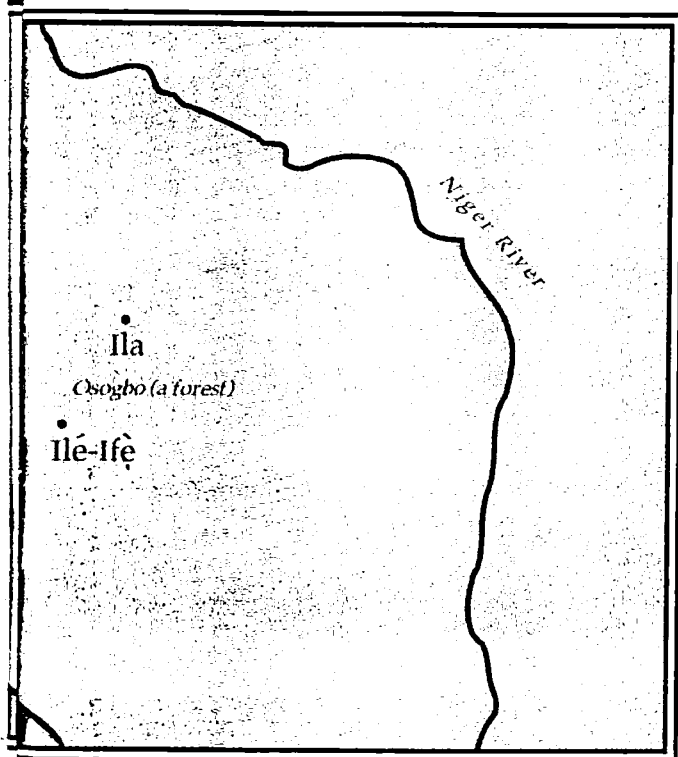
Priestesses of Oṣun, the goddess of healing waters, return from the Oṣun River balancing brass bowls on their heads that are filled with medicinal waters.



YORUBA: civilization

sentence structures in common. Like most African languages, all are tonal. This means that if you change the *tune* of a word, you might also change its meaning. For example, *òkò* means "husband," whereas *òkọ̀* means "hoe," and *òkò* means "vehicle."

The ancestors of the modern Yoruba did not always call themselves by this name or consider themselves one single people. Yet they had much in common culturally. For centuries, most have



Time Line

A.D.

700 Ilé-Ifè is founded, c. 700.

1000 Oyo is founded, c. 1000.

1700 This period is considered the Golden Age of Oyo's imperial conquests, 1700-1750.

1835 Oyo Ilé, the capital of the old Oyo empire, is destroyed.

"c." stands for *circa*, meaning "about" or "around."

deities. These are made of stone, wood, metal, and pottery. Fruit, animals, and objects of beauty are consecrated to the gods at their altars. The greatest offering, however, is the *trance*. During special ceremonies, the drums call down the gods, who are said to "ride" their worshipers like horses. They take over the priest's body, so that every word, dance, and gesture of the priest is attributed to the deity. For the moments or hours of the trance, the visible body is no longer a mere person. It is the earthly manifestation of a god: it is the god.

The Yoruba are also famous for their literary tradition, especially their oral poetry. For example, in Nigeria, the divinity of lightning and fire, *Şango*, is "called" with the chant:

One who uses fire to fight,

One who shows off with fire...

In the present world, it is only in the warmth of the smoke that we feel [*Şango's* worldly form pales before the heavenly one]...

I do your bidding today, deity from the beginning of the world;

Do my own bidding for me...

Yoruba oral literature is rich in proverbs that reflect its people's value system, such as, "We know which people we love, but we don't

know who loves us." The elders are thought to possess the wisdom to use the proverbs wisely. Therefore, if a younger person wishes to speak a proverb in the presence of an elder, she or he must first ask the elder's permission.

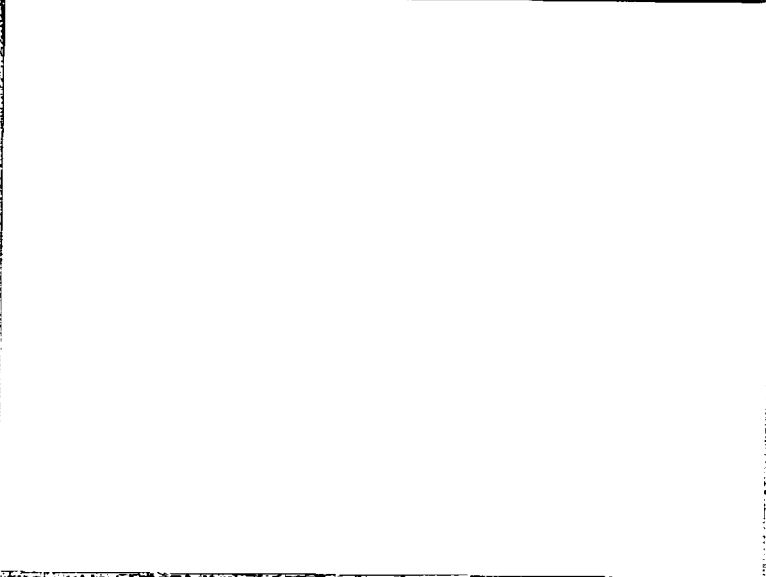
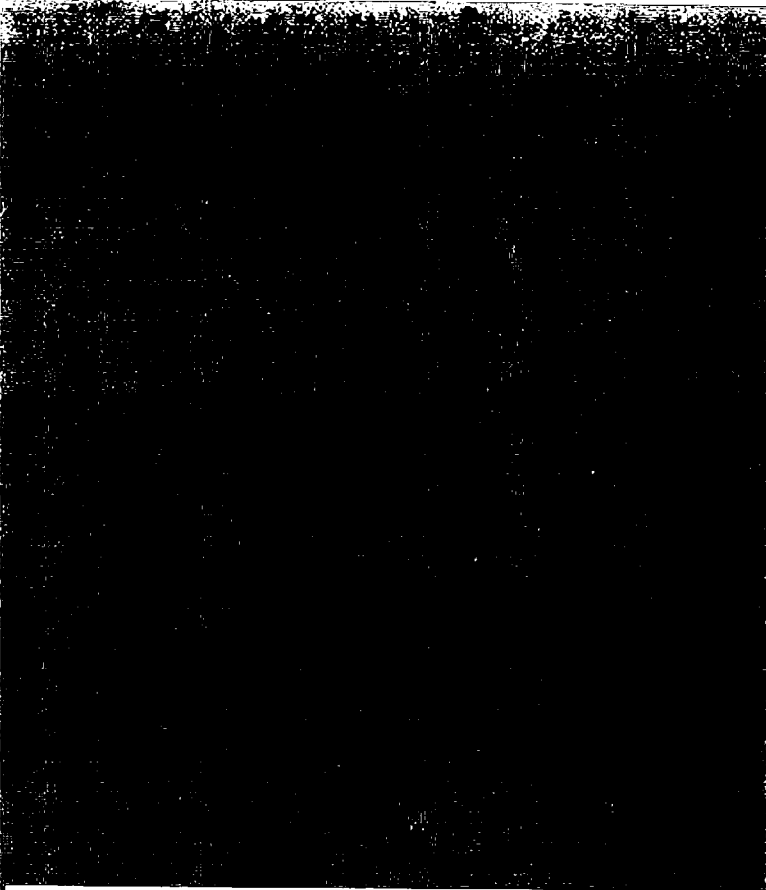
Like English, Yoruba brings together words from diverse languages and cultures, and it has produced a rich written literature. In the 1800s, the British Royal Navy rescued many kidnapped West Africans and resettled them in Freetown, the present-day capital of Sierra Leone. A large number of them came from the region now called "Yorubaland." In Freetown, many of those rescued went to school and became prominent physicians, government administrators, business people, and Christian missionaries. Former captives developed a language that blended elements of the speech of the Oyo, of the Egbas, and of those captives who had returned to West Africa from captivity in the Americas. This rich new hybrid language and its writing system came to be known as "standard Yoruba," and now all Yoruba children are expected to learn it in school, even if they do not speak it at home.

Thus, Yoruba civilization produced and was produced by the interaction of people from multiple continents and has been enriched by their diverse experiences. Today there are tens of thousands of doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers, architects, and artists who trace their roots to Yorubaland. Many of these people are now our neighbors in Washington, D.C., New York City, Boston, London, Berlin, and Rome. 

J. Lorand Matory is the Hugh K. Foster Associate Professor of Anthropology and of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University.



The Yoruba are very respectful of their elders and leaders. Here, at a festival honoring the *oba* or king, senior chiefs prostrate themselves before the *oba*.



24 VOLUME Eight

Number Six

February 1998

ISBN 0382701995