

YORUBA DIASPORA AND THE “OBASHIP” SYSTEM. MAINTAINING TRADITIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract. Yoruba traditional political institutions have played a significant role in shaping governance and socio-cultural organisation in Northern Nigeria. The Yoruba monarch (*Oba*) in this region represents a symbol of cultural values, ethnic cohesion and political sagacity in a society with different historical, social and ethno-religious backgrounds. This study historicizes the Yoruba migration into Northern Nigeria as well as the emergence, structure, functions, significance and contemporary relevance of Yoruba monarchs (*Obas*) in the North, highlighting their roles as cultural custodians, mediators, and sources of authority. The study examines the adaptive strategies employed by Yoruba monarchs to navigate the complex socio-political landscape, characterised by ethnic pluralism and religious diversity, while maintaining a connection to their ancestral roots. It also addresses the challenges faced by these monarchies, such as the opposition of Southwest state governments, the impact of Western education, opposition of Yoruba *Obas* and groups in Southwest Nigeria, hostility from host communities, limited resources, absence of government support and policy, absence of legal backing, intra-ethnic clashes of interest and religious beliefs. By drawing upon historical analysis, ethnographic data, and contemporary accounts, this study aims to illuminate the pivotal role of Yoruba monarchs as both symbolic figures and active participants in the governance and cultural preservation of their communities. The study concludes that the *Obaship* Yoruba system in Northern Nigeria is a demonstration of cultural identity in a foreign land. Therefore, the study recommends that traditional political institutions and preservation of cultural values in diaspora should be strengthened and used as a means of conflict management, cultural diplomacy and peace-building in the host community.

Keywords: Yoruba diaspora, traditional institutions, Northern Nigeria, Obaship system

INTRODUCTION

The Yoruba, being one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, are found primarily in Southwest Nigeria and parts of the Republic of Benin, Togo Republic, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire, with a population exceeding 40 million¹. Their rich cultural values, diverse religious practices and unique social lifestyle worldview dating back over a thousand years have produced a wealth of artistic, linguistic, and spiritual traditions that continue to resonate across the globe.

In Nigeria, the Yoruba inhabit Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, Lagos, as well as parts of Kwara, Kogi, Delta and Edo States. In the pre-colonial era, they organised themselves into many kingdoms, and the most prominent were the Oyo (which grew into an empire comprising some Yoruba-speaking and non-Yoruba-speaking tributary vassals), Ile-Ife, Ijesa, Akoko, Okun, Ekiti, Ondo, Ilaje, Egba, Ijebu, Igbomina and Awori kingdoms. The people of each of these kingdoms constituted a subgroup of the Yoruba².

As the Yoruba population and culture began to gain popularity in Northern Nigeria, they started to organise themselves into communities with effective governance and leadership to coordinate the affairs of the people in the host communities. In line with the traditional political structure of the people, the Yoruba community adopted the *Obaship* system in Northern Nigeria to preserve and maintain Yoruba culture in the region. Also, the Oba Yoruba system in Northern Nigeria promotes the identity, cultural values and spirit of oneness among the people.

The adoption of the homeland political system in the diaspora is a universal trend which is gaining extensive attention among scholars. It is referred to as “Diaspora Politics”. This means the political culture of transnational ethnic diasporas, their relationship with their ethnic homelands and their host states, and their prominent role in ethnic conflicts. Thus, the system helps in coordinating, preserving and promoting the political affairs of the ethnic group. An example of Yoruba diaspora politics is the

Oyotunji Village, founded in Sheldon, South Carolina, United States, in 1970 by Efuntola Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi I, who became the first monarch (Oba) of the Yoruba community. Furthermore, there is the traditional ruler of Ilesa Ire Yoruba community in Florida, United States of America, Oba Iredele Ogunlano. Indeed, Oba Ogunlano was crowned as Oba by the Ooni of Ife, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi. It was Oba Ogunlano's parents, the late Olomide Ogunlano and Omialadora Ajamu, who established the Ilesa Ire Yoruba temple and community in the USA. In a similar manner, Oba Yoruba was installed in Louisiana, USA, where he is responsible for preserving and promoting Yoruba culture, religion, ethics and history. Also, the influx and the increasing population of the Yoruba in Cote d'Ivoire and the urge to promote, develop and preserve the Yoruba culture and language in the diaspora, especially among the youths who were born in the country and have never been to Nigeria before, led to the appointment of Oba Yoruba. The current Oba Yoruba in Cote d'Ivoire is Oba Adebayo Yahaya Giwa (Ori Ade Ilu Cote d'Ivoire). According to the Ooni of Ife, he argues that the encouragement for the Oba Yoruba in diaspora is not only to promote the Yoruba culture but also to safeguard Yoruba culture across the world.

In a similar manner, the Hausa settlers in Yorubaland equally established communities and created strong ties with their homelands in terms of religion, culture, trade and social life since yesteryears. They appointed leaders amongst themselves to coordinate and govern the affairs of the Hausa communities. Indeed, there are several Sarki Hausawa in Southwest Nigeria where they ruled over the Hausa communities using the Emirate political system of administration and promoted the cultural values and heritages. For instance, there is Sarkin Hausawa of Lagos State and head of Arewa council (Alhaji Kabiru Garba), Sarki Hausawa in Ibadan (HRH Alhaji Ali Zungeru), Sarkin Hausawa of Idi-Araba, Lagos (Alh. Idris Lawal Haruna), Seriki Fulani in Badagry (Alhaji Mohammed Umar was installed on 6th January, 2025). There is Sarki Hausawa in Agege, who is also the chairman council of Arewa

chiefs, Agege (HRH Alhaji Musa Mohammed Dogon Kadai). There are Sarki Hausawa, in Ile-Ife, Alhaji Lawal Isiyaka Yaro (Hausa Leader), Osogbo, Ede, Ado-Ekiti, Ikere-Ekiti, Akure, Abeokuta, Sagamu, Ijebu-ode, Ilesa and a host of other Yoruba towns and cities.

It is on this background that our paper focuses on the nature of Yoruba monarchism in Northern Nigeria and the factors that led to the emergence of the Obaship system there. Most importantly, the paper discusses the activities and relevance of Oba Yoruba in Northern Nigeria.

THE YORUBA IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The actual period of the Yoruba migration to the Northern region could not be easily ascertained in this paper, but evidence abounds that the movement and the interaction between the Yoruba and Northern Nigeria could be dated back to the era of the old Oyo Empire and the Trans-Saharan trade, during which goods and services were exchanged between the two regions. Meanwhile, Olaniyi asserts that the migration of the Yoruba to the Northern region commenced since the pre-colonial days, from the 15th century, when a network of trade routes and itinerant caravan traders linked Kano commercially with Yorubaland (Olaniyi 2006, 67-89). The relationship between the North and Yorubaland during this period was anchored on trade and commerce, resulting in the settling down of some Yoruba traders in the Northern region (especially at trade centres and trade routes). The migration was also influenced by a combination of factors, which include historical link, skills acquisition and dispensation, as well as opportunities for construction works.

Indeed, the historical relationship between people of Northern Nigeria and the Yoruba runs deep. While the economists believe economic factors are the basic reasons for migration, philosophers and other scholars feel that a host of intervening factors are also

involved in the migration, ranging from Islamic education, railway construction work, social factors, skilled and unskilled work.

As early as the 19th century, the Yoruba traders had been trading with the North in the areas of food crops such as yams, beans, pepper, rice, millet, potatoes, maize, and groundnuts in exchange with Yoruba goods such as textiles, baskets, mats, cassava flakes (Garri), kolanuts, mats, local soap, palm oil, shoes, farm products, traditional cloths and coconuts³. To this extent, most of the ancient towns like Kano, Jos, Bida, Daura, Zaria, Minna, Suleja, Kaduna, and Lafia (in the present Nasarawa State) turned into commercial towns due to the presence of the influx of the Yoruba in the towns and cities⁴. Indeed, Yoruba traders from as far as Ogbomosho, Ilesha, Okunland, Offa, and Ilorin easily brought items such as woven clothes to sell in the North⁵.

Toyin Falola confirmed that many Ijesha-Yoruba women engaged in the textile and cosmetic trade across towns and cities in the northern region. The trade was referred to as “Osomalo”, a Yoruba word which originated from the fact that the trade was based on a credit system during which the trader stood firm and relentless in collecting his debt back (Falola 1995, 172-173). The Yoruba traders (especially *alajapa*) also made the North their permanent home due to the peaceful nature and acceptability of the host communities⁶. Thus, the foundation of modern Hausa states was laid by the Yoruba migrants.

Before the British took over, Yoruba traders travelled through Northern Nigerian towns and built homes there for more than 500 years. For instance, in Kano and Bida, Yoruba traders built the *Angumar Ayagi* and *Lalemi* quarters, respectively (Olaniyi 2006, 67-89). The early Yoruba settled in Bida, and the majority of them lived in such places as Tswatamukun and Makwala⁷. They were primarily involved in trade and commerce, and played a significant role in the development of the town. The Yoruba introduced new trade routes, which opened up new markets and created new opportunities for commerce.

By the 20th century, the Yoruba had established considerable contact and interactions with the people of Northern Nigeria in the aspects of politics, socio-culture, religion, economy, historical link, geography and diplomacy. Whatever the reasons for migration, there is a general belief among migrants that their aspirations would be met in the place of destination. This, by implication, means the decision to migrate is often made on the basis of perceived opportunities in the area of destination, in contradistinction to the known realities which have their attendant consequences.

By the middle of the 20th century, the Yoruba community had grown significantly, and their contributions to the socio-economic and political developments of their host communities were unprecedented. The peaceful interaction and relationship with their host enabled the Yoruba to establish a socio-cultural and political framework in Northern Nigeria in line with the Yoruba culture.

As earlier mentioned, one factor that aided the mass migration of the Yoruba to this part was the expansion of the railway lines in the 20th century. Most of the workers employed for the construction of the railway infrastructure in the North were Yoruba, and this changed their migratory and settlement patterns in both the rural and urban areas in Northern Nigeria. The opening of the Baro-Kano highway in 1912 signalled a turning point in the movement of Yoruba people to northern Nigeria.

By the 1920s, Bida and its environs, including Minna, began to take a cosmopolitan shape. Obviously, Northern labour was required in the construction of the Northern railway lines, but the southern semi-skilled and skilled labour was also required to make the lines function, since the railway had long been in Yoruba land; thus, the Yoruba people provided the semi-skilled labour and professionalism. Hence, some of the Yoruba railway workers and traders settled permanently in Northern Nigeria.

As a diasporic community, the Yoruba settlement attracted innovative entrepreneurs and artisans who introduced new skills such as painting, printing, photography, tailoring, mechanics, bicycle repairs, laundry, clothing materials, petty trading, construction,

commercial road transport and auto-repairs⁸. Some of these early Yoruba migrants, together with later arrivals, took up new occupations such as block moulding, weaving and barbing, and became masters of those trades in the Northern Region. These Yoruba communities, conscious of their cultural heritage and identities, began to appoint leaders amongst themselves to coordinate their activities and connect them with their ancestral home. This equally distinguishes them from the host community, and this diasporic identity was expressed in the areas of settlement patterns known as *Sabongari*.

The establishment of *Sabongari* between 1911 and 1913 was a central thrust of the British divide-and-rule system constructed to make colonial rule flourish on ethnic division and the enforcement of segregation. In the colonial era, Yoruba immigrants in Northern Nigeria were British “protected persons”, and the hosts were subjects. In the post-independence period, the citizenship status was reversed in favour of the host communities, who were regarded as indigenes and migrants as non-indigenes or settlers (Olaniyi 2004, 67-89). To this extent, after the exit of the British in 1960, the Yoruba, who had hitherto been protected by the British, had to devise a means of protecting themselves through the appointment of Oba Yoruba, who serves as the leader and protector of the Yoruba people in the host community.

The post-independence era witnessed more Yoruba migration to the North in an attempt to participate in the booming commerce. From Funtua, Nguru, Makurdi, Malamadori to Jos, Yoruba diaspora communities were established along the rail lines, taking advantage of modern communication for foodstuffs, livestock, groundnuts and kolanuts trades (*Ibidem*, 67-89). According to Olaniyi, the expulsion of Yoruba from Ghana in 1967 led to their migration to Northern Nigeria towns of Kano, Kaduna, Jos, Zaria, and Minna (*Ibidem*). In essence, the Yoruba who were displaced from Ghana and those searching for greener pastures saw the Northern region as a safe haven and a convenient place to settle down. Indeed, the population of the Ogbomoso migrants in Jos, Yola, Bida, Minna,

Kano, Zaria and Kaduna right from the colonial period till date is unprecedented.

The Yoruba often maintain strong ties to their heritage, cultural values and ethics in the host communities over time. This has helped to preserve some of their traditional customs despite being far away from home. Additionally, the Yoruba language and local medicine and herbs (commonly called Agbo) have gained recognition in Northern Nigeria.

No doubt, between 1960 and 2024, the Yoruba had contributed significantly to the development of Northern Nigeria in the areas of politics, trade and commerce, (economy), health, education, religion, social, fashion, music and culture. The migrants to the Northern region not only preserve their cultural values in the region but also promote it. One of such cultural attributes of the Yoruba is the appointment of the Oba Yoruba in the Northern region.

EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF OBA YORUBA IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The actual period and the specific town where the appointment of the first Oba Yoruba in Northern Nigeria took place could not be easily ascertained in this paper. However, evidence abounds that there were Yoruba leaders or *Baale* who organised and coordinated the affairs of the Yoruba in Northern communities during the colonial period. The Yoruba in Bida (1944), Minna, Kano (1974)⁹, Zaria and Jos were among the earliest to appoint Oba Yoruba in their respective towns of residence with the approval of the Emirs or kings of the host communities.

The increase in the formation of different Town Unions or Associations (also referred to as Parapo), no doubt, paved the way for the creation of Yoruba Obaship in the North. In other words, the Yoruba Town Unions and Associations in various towns in Northern Nigeria constituted a central part upon which sustaining Yoruba solidarity and culture in the region was raised. Pertinently,

the Town Unions and Associations such as Egbe Omo Ogbomoso in Minna, Kaaba Peoples Union (KPU) in Kaduna in the 1930s, Egbe Omo Oduduwa in Kano and Egbe Omo Ogbomoso in Jos maintain socio-cultural linkage with the homeland as well as maintain Yoruba identity in diaspora. Hence, the formation of Town Unions and Associations also led to the emergence of Yoruba Obaship in Northern Nigeria. This is in line with the Yoruba proverb that says that “Agba jowo la fi nso aya, Karin kapo yiye ni nyeni, Ai ko owo rin omo ejo, ohun ni iku se npa won (Ai rin po omo ejo l’onje omo ejo niya). The existence of these unions energised the Yoruba in the Northern region to come together and speak with one voice through the appointment of the Oba Yoruba. In unity, there is strength. Research has revealed that, in most cases, the President-General of these town unions or associations in diaspora were upgraded to the position of Oba Yoruba in such a town, during which all the sub or sectional Yoruba town unions were subservient to him.

The incessant political crises, ethno/religious clashes and other security challenges that ravaged Nigeria in the post-independence era inspired the Yoruba in the Northern region to form a formidable ethnic solidarity, resulting in the appointment of Oba Yoruba.

Though, the position of the Oba Yoruba in the North is not hereditary like the *Kabijesi* or *Oba alayeluma* (His Royal Majesty) in Yoruba hometowns, the Oba are appointed or elected by the Yoruba community in the town of residence/town unions and associations, and endorsed by the traditional ruler of the host communities after in-depth and intensive investigations about the personality of the candidate. The appointment or selection of Oba Yoruba is highly competitive and keenly contested since different interests are involved, ranging from political, town associational (union), educational, business, economic, and personal interests¹⁰. The appointment is also based on credibility, integrity and dignity of the candidate, while the process is transparent, democratic, free and fair. Once the Oba emerges through the rigorous screening exercise, he occupies the position till death except in cases of

voluntary resignation, suspension, relocation back home, sickness, or removal by the host traditional ruler/local government chairman/state government. This permanent position of Oba Yoruba in Northern Nigeria is a similar feature of the Obaship institution at home towns in Southwest Nigeria.

In line with the general Yoruba monarchical system, the administration is headed by the Oba Yoruba and assisted by a handful of chiefs and other political figures under his jurisdiction, local or state governments, while the subordinate units, headed by Baales, concentrate only on the administration of the districts and villages in the local government. Like the Oba, the Baale also had a group of chiefs that assisted him in his area of jurisdiction¹¹. Any erring Baale can be relieved of his post or sanctioned to certain punishment, respectively, for his offence since all Baales are responsible to the Oba at the central level, but this must have the consent of some offices in the administration.

As mentioned above, the *Oba Yoruba* is assisted by a good number of chiefs such as *Basorun* (prime minister), *Otun* (adviser to the king), *Balogun* (Chief Security), *Iya Egbe* (matron), and *Baales* (district heads). In some cases, the chieftaincy titles differ, but with the same purpose and functions. According to Oba Yoruba Gwagwalada, Oba Muraina Baladale, he listed the chieftaincy titles in his jurisdiction as follows: Otunba, Sobaloju, Bobagunwa, Iyalode, Iyaloja, Balogun Okunrin, Balogun Obirin, Ajiroba, Yeye Oge, Jagungbade, Akinrogun, Olori Ode, Iya Abiye, Bobakeye and Baale¹². It is pertinent to state that the Baale are appointed by the Oba Yoruba to be in charge of a small district under his jurisdiction and oversee the affairs of the district¹³.

The Oba is responsible for the protection of the lives and properties of the Yoruba under his jurisdiction. While he enjoyed a high degree of respect and was held in awe, he could not be an autocrat, as there were checks and balances, which shows that the concept of democracy is not an alien phenomenon to traditional socio-political institutions in Yorubaland. The Oba Yoruba remains the chief custodian of the people's history and culture as well as the

rallying point of the Yoruba in Northern Nigeria. The *Oba* is a man of unquestionable personality, a man of high integrity, dignity and moral uprightness.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE OBA YORUBA IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

An important relevance of the Oba Yoruba is the preservation and promotion of the Yoruba culture, language and unity of the people irrespective of their state of origin. This confirms the Yoruba proverb that, “Omo ale omo ni fi owo osi juwe ile Baba re” and “Odo ti o ba gbagbe orisun e, yio gbe lojiji”. “Omo to ba so ile nu, so apo iya ko, lojo ti iya ba jee nita, a ranti ile” (Disowning one's origin or heritage breeds future anguish; when pain takes its toll, the comfort of home is all that's left). The Yoruba monarch in the north performs executive, socio-cultural and political functions in the community. The *Oba* not only represents the people's culture (Olaoba 2013, 3); he is also a cultural ambassador of the Yoruba community in the host Northern region. The Obaship institution integrates the people and strengthens the cultural ties between the Yoruba in the Northern region and the Yoruba at home. Also, the Oba maintains peace and harmony between the Yoruba and the host community.

The Oba Yoruba serves as an agent of information dissemination and policy implementation. For instance, he disseminates important information on the new developments, changes, current issues and policies in hometowns to the Yoruba in the North so as to take necessary actions and implement accordingly. In a similar manner, the Oba communicates vital information that requires urgent attention from the king /local/state governments of the host community to the Yoruba in the town. In some cases, too, information through modern technology or mass media might need clarification and further interpretation; the Oba, therefore, uses his position to educate and enlighten his people on the policy. The Oba

encourages the people to support the policy and pleads with the government for assistance when necessary.

On judicial matters, the Oba adjudicates on civil matters and domestic issues with the support of his chiefs (called Ijoye/Oloye) and Baales. The Oba resolves conflicts among his people, as well as the Yoruba and the indigenes. For instance, domestic issues, business clashes, land/farm disputes concerning the Yoruba citizens and/or between the Yoruba and the indigenes are addressed by the Oba. Among the Yoruba diaspora in northern Nigeria, the institution of *Oba* symbolises authority, solidarity, loyalty and the final arbiter in disputes. Disputes, civil disturbances, fights, debt recovery, marital issues, domestic issues, disagreements, differences and other minor cases are resolved by the Oba while promoting the cultural values of the ethnic group in the north (Ojo 2008, 27-43). These cases are treated by the Oba Yoruba using native or cultural intelligence. It is a way of reducing pressure on the Royal Majesties in their hometowns.

On political matters, the Oba Yoruba suppresses some of the likely political/religious crises which could have escalated to violent ethnic clashes in their respective communities and probably spread to Yorubaland in southwest Nigeria. This could have strained the existing cordial relationship between the Yoruba of the southwest and the north if the Oba had not intervened.

The institution of *Obaship* in the north unites the Yoruba as a socio-cultural entity irrespective of their different towns, religion, diversities and sub-ethnic groups. It gives a sense of oneness in purpose. No doubt, the Yoruba monarchs in Northern Nigeria are very sacrosanct and form the basis of unity and cultural preservation in the region. The Oba Yoruba in diaspora, in my opinion, is a way of bringing all the Yoruba citizens in the Northern region together with a view to addressing the security challenges threatening the unity of the country.

The Oba serves as a link between the host communities and the Yoruba settlers. It also creates peaceful coexistence between the host communities and the Yoruba.

In an advisory role, the Oba serves as a special adviser to the traditional rulers and Emirs of their respective host communities on issues that concern the Yoruba citizens. They are the go-between and the eyes of their people before the Emir or king.

On morality and social development, the Oba Yoruba, with the support of the council of chiefs revitalizes Yoruba identity, language, oral poetry (such as folktales, folklores, folksongs, praise poems or ancestral chanting and cognomen-oriki), adages, storytelling, proverbs, philosophical speeches, social etiquette, clothing and fashion, mode of dressing, beautification, morals and ethics. Through the Oba, good character, moral education (Eko-ile) and ethics, which are associated with Yoruba culture, are also promoted in Northern Nigeria (Ojo 2011, 173-191). In an attempt to unite and integrate the Yoruba in the North, the Oba organises Yoruba Cultural Day, which features cultural dance, music, beauty contest, fashion parade, Art exhibition, food exhibition, debate and local sports (*e.g.* Ayo game)¹⁴.

The legitimacy of an Oba in any particular space is anchored on the consent of the majority of the governed through established and commonly cherished law, which often makes the inhabitants surrender their absolute rights to the Oba. To that extent, the Oba Yoruba in Northern Nigeria are legitimate and relevant as long as they are accepted by the governed (Yoruba community), host communities and the state government in the North.

CHALLENGES AND CRITICISM AGAINST THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE YORUBA *OBASHIP* SYSTEM IN DIASPORA

There have been a series of debates and criticisms concerning the relevance of *Oba Yoruba* in Northern Nigeria. A school of thought argued that it is a duplication of royalty and a flagrant hijack of royal responsibilities, which could lead to cultural conflict. It is argued that most of the Oba did not come from the royal house, hence no royal blood in them, therefore not qualified to be called Oba.

Another has condemned the system on the basis that an Ifa oracle was not consulted and that the candidate did not pass through the Council of *Afobaje* (king makers or traditional council of chiefs). Others claimed that the Oba did not pass through *Ipebi* for three months (seclusion home or confinement period) and the Oba did not pass through the traditional Yoruba rituals and usual sacrifices associated with the appointment of Obaship in Yorubaland.

A school of thought argues that Oba Yoruba lacks validity as no certificate of recognition and staff of office were presented to the candidate by the state government of their respective hometown. Yet, there is another school of thought that posits that the Oba Yoruba neither possesses nor wears the ancestral beaded crown, which is compulsory regalia of a typical Yoruba king, hence they are not recognised. Another school argues that there is no state government legislative approval or the governor's consent to the appointment and installation of Oba Yoruba in the diaspora. Some even claimed that the Oba Yoruba does not have Agbo Ile Oba (ancestral royal compound) or royal house in Northern Nigeria. Also, there are no procedures that must be followed to sustain the culture and tradition associated with the appointment or installation of an Oba.

Furthermore, the Yoruba Obas Forum (YOF) has also condemned in strong terms the installation of *Oba* Yoruba in the diaspora, describing such practices as fraudulent and alien to Yoruba culture and tradition¹⁵. The Forum also stated that having a Yoruba Oba in a state like Dallas in the United States of America (USA) and countries like France, Holland, and Ireland was nothing but a complete denigration of Yoruba culture and tradition. The Forum argues that the traditional institution remained the only sacred institution that had endured the rigours of civilisation, stressing that there was always a successive plan for the installation of an Oba in Yoruba land in order to avoid anarchy from the traditional institution.

The Forum stated that “Nobody can duplicate our sacred culture abroad. It is never done anywhere in the world. It is very bad when

some people masquerade as an Oba in a foreign land, and as the custodians of Yoruba culture and tradition, we would not allow them to misrepresent us to the world”¹⁶. To the Forum, the practice is a mere duplication of traditional, sacred and royal functions of the Obaship system in diaspora.

However, this paper has debunked these arguments on the basis that the Oba Yoruba is not operating in southwest Nigeria but in Northern Nigeria, where the environment, culture and religion do not support ritualism, sacrifices and Yoruba traditional religion. The northern part of Nigeria is predominantly an Islamic region. Unlike the Oba in the southwest that ruled over a homogenous population and society with the same language, culture, attributes and history, the Oba Yoruba in the north ruled over a very complex, heterogeneous population and society with diverse sub-ethnic groups, different interests, different language and history. Therefore, they do not need a particular state government from the southwest to authenticate their role and give them certificates. Meanwhile, certificates and instruments of authorities are given to the Oba Yoruba by the Emir or king of the host communities where they operate in the northern region¹⁷.

CONCLUSION

The Yoruba monarchical system across the Northern region is a demonstration of the Yoruba ethnic cohesion, intergroup relations and promotion of the Yoruba culture in diaspora. The Yoruba Obaship continues to inspire, unite, and empower people of Yoruba descent.

This paper has demonstrated that the circumstances and the situation in Northern Nigeria require the adoption of the Obaship system in the region. The system is to protect Yoruba culture from going into extinction and to promote unity, solidarity, cooperation, welfare and general interest of the Yoruba in Northern Nigeria.

As evident from the discussions in this paper, the roles of the Oba Yoruba in Northern Nigeria are not only relevant but a child of necessity in this period of cultural degradation and insecurity. The Obaship institution is an essential aspect of Yoruba culture that must be preserved and promoted across the boundaries of Yorubaland. In my own view, the adoption of the Obaship system in the North is not to needlessly duplicate the roles or responsibilities of Yoruba traditional rulers in the Southwest but to extend and perpetuate the robust political culture of the Yoruba in the Northern region. The Northern diaspora Obas are not only ambassadors of the Yoruba Kings in Northern Nigeria, but cultural ambassadors of the Yoruba race.

NOTES

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14. Oral Interview with Oba Agbaje Nathaniel, Oba Yoruba, Dagiri Gwagwalada, Abuja, 55+, Male, Oba' palace, Dagiri, Gwagwalada, Abuja, 12/1/2025.
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16. Nigerian Tribune, January 15, 2024 or <https://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/headlines/yoruba-obas-forum-condemns-installation-of-obas-in-diaspora>.
17. Oral Interview with Oba Agbaje Nathaniel, Oba Yoruba, Dagiri Gwagwalada, Abuja, 55+, Male, Oba' palace, Dagiri, Gwagwalada, Abuja, 12/1/2025.

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