

## The Yoruba and Their Language Newspapers: Origin, Nature, Problems and Prospects

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**ABSTRACT** The paper examines the Yoruba people, their history, their language and the geography of their location. Essentially, too, the paper attempts a study of the newspapers published in the language of the Yoruba. In specific terms, it considers the origin, the nature, the operations, the impact, the problems and the prospects of the newspapers. Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba was the first Yoruba newspaper. It existed for eight years between December 3, 1959 and October 13, 1867. Among the Yoruba newspapers existing now, Irohin Yoruba, said to be a re-incarnation of Iwe Irohin, is the oldest. It was founded in 1945 by the Allied Newspapers of Nigeria Limited. As at present, it is under the management of African Newspapers of Nigeria Plc. Other existing Yoruba newspapers include Alaroye, Akede Agbaye, Alaye and Ajoro. Yoruba newspapers are mostly weeklies. They are very generous in the choice of point size of their story headlines, most especially, when they come either on the front or back pages. The newspapers are packaged like tabloid newspaper-magazine. Their headlines are, usually, dramatic in tone. A major problem confronting Yoruba newspapers in the non-challant attitude of the educated Yoruba elites. This has robbed Yoruba newspapers of the kind of patronage, recognition and respect enjoyed by newspapers published in English Language.

### INTRODUCTION

Communication is an inevitable phenomenon in any community of living things, be they human or not. Dare (1985) attempts a review of a popular saying credited to Aristotle by saying that:

*Communication is the fundamental social process and man in society is not basically a political animal as Aristotle held, but a communicating animal; for politics, like every other activity in society, is based on communication.*

In essence, man, in any society *cannot not* communicate. Meanwhile, communication in modern societies has gone beyond the interpersonal or a situation where participants in a communication event come together flesh and blood. The vastness and heterogeneity of the modern society has made this impracticable. The invention of printing and the emergence of broadcast technology have made mass communication possible in modern society. And, without any gain saying, the media of mass communication have played tremendous roles in the education, information, entertainment and socialization of man. Schramm (1964), for instance, notes that since the development of printing, the printed media have become tools of political and social change. Faure (1972) adds:

*The role, which the mass media play in the*

*transmission of information and culture, is generally beyond question.*

The credo of the *Chicago Tribune* talks of the mass media as:

*An institution developed by modern civilisation to present the news of the day, to foster commerce and industry, to inform and lead public opinion and to furnish that check upon government which no constitution has been able to provide.*

Infact, Blackely (1973) sees mass media as the life wire of society, the social neural system on which the new capabilities of science and technology rest.

If we agree that mass media are indispensable to our political and social change, we, therefore, need to address our minds to the necessity for the popularization of this change and design of messages that are culturally sensitive, language specific and in tune with the social realities of our people. Salawu (2001: 1) contends that the language in which a (development) message would be disseminated is a very important aspect of the message treatment. Nwuneli (1986: 203) posits that the indigenous language of a community is the best suited for the purpose of conveying any message, whatsoever, to the said community.

*Sapir (1929) declares: The fact of the matter*

*is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon on the language habits of (the) group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. (Quoted in Mandelbaum, 1942: 162).*

This punctures the whole argument for globalization, which, unwittingly, advocates a preponderant attachment to "international" languages. The fact is that no other language can reflect any people's real language of life other than their own.

In line with this argument, we dare say there is an avalanche of researches and evidence pointing to the efficacy of the use of indigenous language or mother-tongue for instructional purposes (Okombo and Rubgumya, 1996). A study recently carried out by this writer also underscores the comparative effectiveness of Yoruba (indigenous) language newspapers over English language newspapers for (development) communication\*.

In essence, the phenomenon of indigenous language press calls for attention. In this paper, we shall be looking at Yoruba newspapers- their origin, their nature, their operations, their impact, their problems and their prospects.

### THE YORUBA

The Yoruba people are found in the West of the lower Niger, what is now commonly referred to as the South West of Nigeria. It has even been claimed that at one time the vast areas from the banks of the Niger to the Volta had come under the authority of Yoruba rulers. The Yoruba country lies roughly between latitudes 6<sup>o</sup> and 9<sup>o</sup> N and longitudes 2<sup>o</sup> 30' and 6<sup>o</sup> 30' East (Atanda, 1996). The area spreads across the Republic of Benin and Togo. They are also found in such places as Sierra Leone, Gambia and across the Atlantic, as far as the Caribbean, West Indies and the Americas especially in Brazil and Cuba. Arifalo and Ogen (2003) note that worldwide, it is estimated that the Yoruba have a population of over 40 million.

Arifalo and Ogen (2003) also assert that the Yoruba are one of the major and most prominent ethnic groups in West Africa. Falola (1999) claims that the Yoruba are one of the most researched ethnic groups in the world, contending that as far back as 1976, the available literature on the Yoruba, despite many omissions, numbered 3,488

items. Scholars note that this vast amount of work is quite substantial and unrivalled in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Yoruba have several traditions about how their people began life. One of them says that it was at Ile-Ife, which the Yoruba regard as the cradle of their nations, that mankind was first created (Davidson, 1976: 117). This mythical creation legend intimates that the Yoruba were the original inhabitants of the Ife area.

Recounting this legend, Stride and Ifeka (1978: 288) report that at the dawn of time, the world was a watery waste. On the orders of his father – the supreme God, Olorun - Oduduwa climbed down a chain from the sky. He brought with him a handful of earth, a cockerel and a palm-nut. He scattered the earth upon the water and it formed the earth at Ile-Ife. The cockerel dug a hole in which Oduduwa planted the palm-nut, and up sprang a mighty tree with sixteen branches, each the ruling family of an early Yoruba State.

Stride and Ifeka (1978: 290) also recall another tradition which indicates that the Yoruba people were produced by inter-marriage between a small band of invaders from the Savanna and the indigenous inhabitants of the forest. The story is that Oduduwa was the son of Lamurudu, sometimes described as a ruler from the East, sometimes as a prince of Mecca. When Islam was introduced into his homeland, Oduduwa refused to forsake the religion of his ancestors, so he and his supporters were expelled from their native land. After long wanderings, they settled among the forest people and founded the site of Ife.

The deviations in these two traditions, notwithstanding, one common fact is that Oduduwa is regarded as "the much-revered legendary ancestral hero of the Yoruba" (Osae and Nwabara, 1980: 92). Oduduwa had seven close descendants. Some traditions say they were his sons; others call them grandsons. These seven young men moved out to found the ruling families of seven new Yoruba states. They are the states of Owu, Sabe, Popo, Benin, Ila, Ketu and Oyo.

These Yoruba sites were linked together during ancient times in a confederation under the spiritual and political leadership of the Ooni of Ife who was the senior living representative of the Oduduwa ancestors. This confederal system seems to have left each State to run its own affairs, while providing means for keeping the peace

between them. Ife, however, began to lose its political leadership in the sixteenth century with the rise of Oyo in modern Yorubaland. Notwithstanding, Ooni remains the spiritual head of the Yoruba (Osae and Nwabara, 1980: 92; Stride and Ifeka, 1978: 291). Oyo, a formidable empire reached the height of its power in the eighteenth century.

The collective success of the Yoruba under Oyo leadership was to make the Yoruba tongue as recognised lingua franca almost to the shores of Volta. Linguistically, the Yoruba emerged as a distinct language group from the Kwa group between about 2,000 BC and 1,000 BC from the Niger-Benue confluence area (Atanda, 1996).

Arifalo and Ogen (2003) identify two important factors in the crystallization of Yoruba civilization. The first is that virtually all the indigenous inhabitants of Yorubaland belonged to the same linguistic stock. The second is the environment, which, to a large extent, influenced the historical development of the Yoruba. The geographical features of the area made it to be well suited to agriculture, metal technology, industry and commerce. Thus, Mabogunje (1962, cited in Adediran 1998) remarks that this makes the Yoruba one of the most urbanized ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Uche (1989) asserts that they are the most urbanised group of people in Africa.

### In the Beginning

*Iwe Irohin Fun awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* was the first Yoruba newspaper. More than this, *Iwe Irohin* was historically significant for being the first indigenous language newspaper in Africa (Akinfeleye, 1985: 35; Duyile, 1987: 17) and indeed the first newspaper in Nigeria.

*Iwe Irohin* was established by Reverend Henry Townsend, a missionary of the Christian Missionary Society (CMS). The maiden issue of the newspaper hit the streets of Abeokuta on December 3, 1859. At inception, the newspaper was published fortnightly. It started with only Yoruba edition. In the following year of its publication, the English edition was added to it. It, then, became a bilingual weekly. It had eight pages with four pages in Yoruba language and four in English, translating the Yoruba version of it. In 1866, the English and Yoruba editions began to be published separately.

The content of *Iwe Irohin* focused on a wide

range of issues: births, deaths, movement of religious ministers, parish activities, baptism and confirmation, politics especially those concerning Abeokuta and its environs, economic matters such as the trade reports – cottons statistics and produce prices. It also included news about colonial administration, some foreign news, advertisements and public announcements. *Iwe Irohin* sold for 120 cowries.

It existed for eight years before it ceased publication on October 13, 1867 during a popular uprising called IFOLE. Ade Ajayi wrote:

It was a spontaneous uprising... Libraries were destroyed, harmonious broken down, and the printing works where the *Iwe Irohin*... (was published) was destroyed. (Quoted in Duyile, 1987: 21)

This, however, was not a “permanent death” as in scores of years later, the newspaper would resurrect and start publishing again.

There were other early Yoruba newspapers, which however, are no more. They included *Iwe Irohin Eko*, *The Yoruba News*, *Eko Akete* and *Eleti Ofe*.

### LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Among the Yoruba newspapers existing now, *Iroyin Yoruba* is the oldest. It was founded by the Allied Newspapers of Nigeria Limited, a publishing company formed by leaders of the Action Group as an alternative to the old Service Press Ltd. The similarity in the names of *Iwe Irohin Yoruba* and *Iroyin Yoruba* is so striking that one tends to suspect a connection between the two. It is possible that the management of African Newspapers of Nigeria Plc, present publishers of *Tribune* titles and *Iroyin Yoruba* bought the title *Iwe Irohin Yoruba* for the Yoruba Newspaper. Akinfeleye (1985: 35-36) is more assertive of this view, contending that *Iwe Irohin* still exists till today, and is one and the same with *Irohin Yoruba*.

*Gbohunghohun* appeared on the news stands on October 29, 1970. It is a publication of Sketch Press Ltd, Ibadan; founded by the then Western State Government of Nigeria (now broken into Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Ekiti States). Presently, Sketch Press is in comatose; and, therefore, the newspapers on its stable, including *Gbohunghohun*, are in comatose.

*Isokan* is a publication of Concord Press of Nigeria Ltd, owned by the late Basorun M. K. O

Abiola. Salawu (1993: 46) reports that the newspaper first appeared on the newsstands on July 15, 1980. Presently, CPN is undergoing re-organisation as a result of a financial crisis since the death of its founder in 1998. Thus, all operations in the company have been put on hold.

There have been more recent Yoruba newspapers. For instance, *Alaroye* a popular Yoruba newspaper/magazine started publishing in 1996. The emergence of the newspaper marked a milestone in the affairs of Yoruba newspapers in Nigeria. Within a short time, this newspaper became popular because of its arresting cover design and styles of headline-casting and story presentation. It actually popularized reading of Yoruba newspapers among the folks. It is the largest local language newspaper with a circulation figure of not less than 150,000 per week. It is, simply, the highest circulating weekly in Nigeria today. It sells in Europe and several West African countries where the Yoruba reside (*The Fourth Estate*, 2000: 7). Its publishers, World Information Agents, have also added other Yoruba publications to their stable. They include: *Alaroye* magazine, *Atoka Alaroye*, *Iri Aye* and *Akede Agbaye*. Other Yoruba news publications are *Alaye*, *Ajoro*, *Ofe* etc.

Essentially, there has been a marked difference in terms of contents and typography between *Iwe Irohin* and the Yoruba newspapers of today.

### Features of Yoruba Newspapers

Yoruba newspapers are mostly weeklies. They are very generous in the choice of point size for their story headlines, most especially, when they come either on the front or back pages. The newspapers are packaged like tabloid newspaper magazine, that is, they blend the characteristics of newspaper with those of magazine (Akinfeleye, 1967: 59-61).

Like typical Nigerian newspapers, their front pages are adorned with a number of news stories, ranging from three to five. And like magazines, they carry lead headlines in bold types, the size of which ranges between 72 and 120 points. The lead headline dominates the front page of the newspaper and is always an attention-arrester, mostly in Roman and, sometimes, in Gothic typeface.

The headlines are usually, dramatic in tone. Consider these from *Isokan*: 'Gbese! Agbe Onikoko busekun' (Debt! Cocoa farmer bursts

into tears); 'Apero Ofin Ile wa: Talaka fee soro' (Constitutional Conference: The poor want to talk); and 'Buredi d'onje olowo' (Bread now for the rich). And these from *Alaroye*: 'Haa! Awon Asofin so Nigeria donigbese-Gbogbo owo pata ni won ti ji ko o, Anyim n kole olowo nla S'Abuja, Na'Abba naa kowo Nigeria lo soke okun' (Haa! Law makers impoverish Nigeria-They have emptied the nation's treasury, Anyim is building a magnificent house in Abuja, Na'Abba also transfers Nigeria's money abroad).

Notwithstanding the variations in styles, Yoruba newspapers in general thrive on casting screaming and sensational headlines. Imaginativeness, in this regard, should, however, be recognised.

The newspapers do not pretend their allegiance to the grassroots. This is reflected in the kinds of stories they carry (stories that deal with common folks), the presentation of their stories (as an effort to explain current affairs in the manner the common folks would understand them), and in the way they cast their headlines.

At the lexical level, most of the writings of the newspapers are done in simple language. Except on a few occasions, the choice of words is ordinary. This is so, it is believed, because the writings are done for mass audience. Typical of the language of newspapers, especially news reports, the language is used in an elevated fork. In such instances of the use of elevated language, we have proverbs, allegories and others like that. It does not matter the game of the journalistic writings in the newspapers, the colorful use of language comes in different forms but most often in the features, the editorial and the literary write-ups.

About semantics, it is observed that some of the newspapers, in their write-ups, try to be as warm and as personal as possible. A number of the news stories begin with proverbs, which seems a way of luring the readers with rhetorics. Yet, a good number of the stories seem not to be interested in any colourfulness; they directly go into the gist of the news.

An examination of some of the features stories also reveal this interest in exchanging greetings and pleasantries with readers before the writers go into the kernel of the write-ups. This, it is observed, may have emanated from the Yoruba oral culture which *places* large premium on courtesy. Yet, there are other features and opinion write-ups that are just formal in tone and approach.

### Role of Yoruba newspapers to the Yoruba Socio Political Development

There is inter – relationship between the media and the society. As the society impacts on the media – their nature and content – so do the media reflect the society and impact on the society.

Suarez (1978: 3) reinforces the influence of mass media on society, stressing in particular, the functional nature of the media institution:

*I do not regard journalism and communication media as autonomous, as existing independent from overall national and social awareness, but as a part of it. This social entity and its structure act on mass media, influence them directly, determine their character and content.... Journalism and communication media cannot be entirely independent if only because without a certain conception of shaping social awareness they would lose the main objectives of their activities.*

Building on previous works such as Lasswell (1960), Wright (1960), Mendelsohn (1966), and McBride et al (1980); McQuail (2000: 79-80) identifies five functions of the mass media. These are:

- (i) *Information*: Providing information about events and conditions in society and the world; indicating relations of power; facilitating innovation, adaptation and progress.
- (ii) *Correlation*: explaining interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events and information; providing support for established authority and norms; socializing; coordinating separate activities; consensus building; setting orders of priority and signaling relative status.
- (iii) *Continuity*: Expressing the dominant culture and recognizing subcultures and new cultural developments; forging and maintaining commonality of values.
- (iv) *Entertainment*: providing amusement, diversion and the means of relaxation; reducing social tension.
- (v) *Mobilisation*: campaigning for societal objectives in the sphere of politics, war, economic development, work and sometimes religion.

To varying degrees, Yoruba newspapers, without doubt, have been playing the various roles of information, correlation, continuity, entertainment and mobilization of the Yoruba people or nation as exposed by Mcquail.

### Problems of Yoruba Newspapers

In most developing countries, communication in indigenous languages has been adversely affected due to the fact of their colonization. This fact of history has actually affected the sensibility of the people of the third world. For instance, English is Nigeria's official language and the major medium of communication; therefore, indigenous languages are not highly esteemed.

This attitude is a major problem confronting indigenous language newspapers. The few indigenous language newspapers that exist critically suffer from low awareness and patronage. Perhaps, until the emergence of *Alaroye*, not many people reckoned with Yoruba newspapers. Ironically, Coker (1968) says *Iroyin Yoruba*, established in 1945, was the widest read weekly in the 40s. Gradually, however, the people who are supposed to be the readers became more and more anglicized, and, therefore, jettisoned the reading of the indigenous language newspapers. The situation did not change despite all attempts to induce sales of the newspapers. For instance, today, while English language newspapers, published in Nigeria sell for between N50 and N80, Yoruba newspapers carry cover prices of between N20 and N30, yet they are not considerably patronized.

The neglect these newspapers suffer is not only from the general public. Most people who work in the establishments where the newspapers are published do not give them any consideration either. For instance advertisement executives in the establishments are not always enthusiastic about canvassing for advertisement for these media. Their lack of enthusiasm may, however, have been a result of the unwillingness of advertisers to place their adverts in these newspapers (Salawu, 1993).

Given this situation, managements of the newspaper establishments do not consider as very important the indigenous language section, especially when it comes to allocation of resources such as newsprint, among others. All attention is focused on other titles of the establishments published in English language. Dare (1990: 8), similarly, notes that because it is presumed that there is only a small audience for the indigenous language newspapers, they are produced for the most part on a weekly basis and as a consequence, they are not self-sustaining. And because they are not self-sustaining, because

they are held to constitute a drain on resources, Dare observes that little effort is made to develop them and broaden their appeal. And because such effort is lacking the indigenous language newspapers continue to stagnate

The situation at Sketch Press Limited when it was resuscitated in August 2000 after a period of recess provided a graphic demonstration. Whereas English titles (*Daily Sketch*, *Weekend Sketch* and *Sunday Sketch*) on the stable of the Press resurfaced, *Gboungboun* its only Yoruba newspaper never saw the light of the day till the Press went into comatose again late 2001.

In essence, because of the non-challant attitude of the educated Yoruba elites, Yoruba newspapers have not been enjoying the kind of patronage, recognition and respect enjoyed by those published in English Language, the nation's second but official language (Salawu, 2001).

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In order to encourage communication in Yoruba language, the first step is to promote, vigorously, the language through educational policy. Let the governments in Yorubaland be more serious with the implementation of the provisions of the National Policy on Education of 1977, revised in 1981, which stipulate that pre-primary and junior primary classes be conducted in the language of the immediate community and the study of two Nigerian languages as subjects in the Junior Secondary School (JSS). A vital point is that government should ensure that these requirements are fully complied with in all schools, whether government-owned or privately-owned. *Awoniyi (1995: 446) demonstrated the failure rates in Yoruba language at both the West African School Leaving Certificate levels over a period of years. For instance, between 1983 and 1985, over 44% of the total number of candidates who sat for Yoruba language at WASCE failed. In another vein, Aniche (1997: 73-79) graphically demonstrates how fast Nigerian languages are dying among Nigerian children. According to her, one research shows a national average of 7 per cent of secondary school students, while another shows a 30 per cent figure of primary school pupils (in the Rivers State), all of who are unable to speak their ancestral language.*
2. Similarly, governments in Yorubaland and, perhaps, non-governmental organizations should consider the promotion of a reading culture, especially in Yoruba language, as a programme that should be pursued vigorously. Media campaigns should be mounted, among other things, while encouragement should be given to creative writing and publishing in Yoruba language.
3. Public and private sectors, including media operations, should also come together to organize seminars and workshops where there can be cross fertilization of ideas on how to improve the lot of writings in Yoruba language, in general, and Yoruba newspapers, in particular.
4. Yoruba linguists have an urgent task in the publication of glossaries of scientific and technological terminologies in Yoruba languages. This will aid journalists handling stories in areas that are scientific and technological.
5. Publishers of Yoruba newspapers – government and private – should strive to make the newspapers dailies and easily available. Through this, the newspapers can serve the information needs of the people and become more familiar with them.
6. Publishers of Yoruba newspapers should make deliberate efforts to popularize the newspapers and educate the public about their operations while journalists working on the newspapers should be more aggressive in their information gathering. *These were the excuses or complaints made by the Oyo State Director of Information and the Oyo State Director of National Orientation Agency in separate interviews with this writer\*\* for their inability to relate with Yoruba newspapers.*
7. Public and private sectors should also encourage the publishing of Yoruba newspapers through advertisements and supplements in these newspapers. It is also hoped that more investors will join in the publishing of the newspapers.
8. Advertising agencies should be creating and printing original advertisements in Yoruba language. *An editor of Isokan told this writer*

*that in the newspaper's bid to shore up its revenue, they resorted to translating ad copies, collected from agencies, from English to Yoruba (Salawu, 1993).*

9. Publishers of Yoruba newspapers should continue to make the newspapers affordable in order to encourage purchase and readership.
10. Media operators should make available substantial human and material resources at the disposal of the units that publish Yoruba newspapers.
11. The various institutes and departments of mass communication/journalism in Yorubaland should also help in this crusade in their admission policy and curricula. They should make a credit pass in Yoruba language compulsory for candidates seeking admission into their schools. And, in their curricula, they should make compulsory for the students, the offering of courses in Yoruba language.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has been able to discuss Yoruba newspapers by going into their origin, pointing out their features, measuring their roles and diagnosing their problems. With the pointers we have and the recommendations made this paper can then affirm a prognosis that the future is bright for the Yoruba newspapers.

Yoruba newspapers as a phenomenon have a lot of potentials if only we can appreciate our language and recognize the fact that no language is superior to another. Hymes (1961) posits that "all known languages roughly manifest the same kind of symbolic behaviour system, in spite of their great variety". Ferguson (1968:28) puts it more succinctly:

In this fundamental sense, there is as yet no convincing evidence that the total structure of one language is better than that of another...

The famous Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, was quoted in Eyoh (1986) as saying that a language is capable to do whatever a people want it to do. Elugbe (1991:44) corroborates this.

In as much as this paper recognizes the importance of English in our national and international lives, it is of the view that the indigenous language (Yoruba) must also be accorded its pride of place. Banjo (1995:187) captures this essence:

The dominance of the English language at this stage of modernization is inevitable, but the

situation is evolving rather than static. In that process of evolution, all the languages have a part to play, and if Nigeria is to make a distinctive contribution to human civilization, it will have to be as a result of the symbiotic relationship between English and the indigenous languages, a pooling of the resources of all the languages without foreclosing the contributions that any of them can make.

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