

Oríta Borgu: the Yorùbá and the Bààtonu down the ages

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Thetis, the sea nymph to Achilles, her son by Peleus:

Only yesterday Zeus went off to the Ocean River
To feast with the Ethiopians, loyal, lordly men,
And all the gods went with him. But in twelve days
The Father returns to Olympus ...¹

Dido's sister is persuading her to let flow her passion for Aeneas:

Do you believe
This matters to the dust, to ghosts in tombs?
Granted no suitors up to now have moved you,
Neither in Libya nor before, in Tyre –
Iarbas you rejected, and the others,
Chieftains bred by the land of Africa
Their triumphs have enriched – will you content
Even against a welcome love?

Iarbas, Dido's African suitor curses her:

Her twisting course
Took her [Rumor] to King Iarbas, whom he set
Ablaze with anger piled on to anger
Son of Jupiter Hammon by a nymph,
A ravished Garamantean, this prince
Had built the god a hundred giant shrines,
A hundred altars, each with holy fires.²

*Omi, omi lèniyàn
Bó bá sàń wá
A tún sàń padà*

Humanity is tide
Now it flows hither
Now it flows thither

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¹Homer, *The Iliad*, I in Mack (1995: 505–8).

²Virgil, *Aeneas IV* in Mack (1995).

The term ‘crossroads’, most commonly used to gloss the Yorùbá lexical item *oríta*, does not adequately convey its meaning. In addition to any number of access ways and paths converging into *oríta*, *oríta* serves, in its own right, as a veritable arena of encounter, an arena of contact among beings, and for the exchange of goods and values. Each access way or path vanishes – or, better still, merges – into *oríta* in a manner similar to the estuaries of a river emptying themselves into a basin, a sea or an ocean, which may be traversed to enter into another access way. *Oríta*, it bears repeating, is not a point; it has dimensions; it is a space, an arena defined by encounters and exchanges. That is why, in Yorùbá cosmology, the centre point of *oríta* is the liminal domain of Èṣù, the custodian of *àṣẹ*, the primordial life force; Èṣù, the ultimate arbiter among beings – indeed, among all forces.

This article assumes and argues that through the ages, stretching beyond any contact with proselytizing faiths and mercantile aliens, the Bààtonu people³ have tended the geophysical entity Borgu. This straddles the frontiers of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, and the Bààtonu turned it into the *oríta* for all the cultures of the sub-region bounded by the southward sweep of the River Niger from its deepest penetration into the Sahelian region.⁴ This has given rise to many consequences addressed by scholars since Parakou and Nikki. Studies have found that many communities and ‘city states’ among the Yorùbá⁵ embrace, with pride, accounts of Bààtonu founding heroes and princes. The Bààtonu have offered hospitality to disaffected, dissident and defaulting Yorùbá princes.

Borgu is so situated in relation to the Yorùbá world that the Yorùbá adage *eni tí a sùn tí là á jarunpá lù* (the one we sleep next to is the one we hit when we stir and kick in our sleep) applies to their association and inter-relationships down the ages. Thus, when ambitious princes and entrepreneurs among the Yorùbá wanted to establish contact with cultures to the south-west, to the far west, and beyond *Odò Oya*, ‘the River Niger’, Borgu served them as *oríta*, as defined above. It therefore raises more than mere intellectual curiosity that the ‘post-contact’⁶ storytellers of both the Yorùbá and the Bààtonu embrace myths of a Middle Eastern origin in the same way as they embrace those of all the Mandinka and kindred cultures that claim the Sundjata epic (Sisoko 1 and 2). As the Yorùbá *omi*

³Plural Baatombu; also referred to as Bariba; listed as related to Yorùbá. Population in 2016 was 1,000,000 in Benin and 400,000 in Nigeria (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bariba_people>).

⁴This study was first presented at the ‘Colloque Internationale “Borgu 98”’ at the Université Nationale du Bénin, held in Parakou and Nikki, 6–9 April 1999. It calls into question the paradigmatic position taken over the years by scholars, both indigenous and foreign, that the people of West Africa, including the Yorùbá, migrated to their present location from the Middle East, from Egypt, or from somewhere in the Horn of Africa. This position, which informed virtually all of the chapters in Biobaku (1973), was espoused by Lucas and by scholars who have since considered his scholarship to be seminal.

⁵Estimated total population in 2016 is given as 43 million, with 40 million in Nigeria and 1.7 million in Benin (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_people>). Related ethnic groups include the Bariba. An example of a Yorùbá city state that has Bààtonu founding heroes and princes is Ògbómòṣò, which was settled as an agglomeration of communities for self-defence against the onslaught of the Fulani jihad into Yorùbá territory during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

⁶The term ‘contact’ will serve us in this study to refer to the encounter with both the Islamic and the Christianized Western European worlds.

lèniyàn excerpt above suggests, it is by no means self-evident that any or all of the peoples in the sub-region of West Africa could not have migrated from the Middle East – or from anywhere else, for that matter. Yet, in the context of the socio-political history of the sub-region in the last millennium, the plausibility – not to say the ‘validity’ – of these myths is very important for our self-concept, and, indeed, for our proper orientation in a world that is fast evolving into one single global village. In the new world order, we have to deal with more than a mere romantic notion of individuality, a notion that assumed the grotesque proportion of ‘nationality’ in nineteenth-century Europe.

How do we test these received myths for validity? How do we identify strands of our adopted essence that link Borgu with the Persian Kisra, the Yorùbá with *Lámúrúdu* (Nimrod), and the Mandinka Sundjata with Bial, an illustrious associate and fellow Semite of Muhammad, Peace be unto Him? How many millennia did it take to engender the culture of the Bààtonu, a people whose once robust population has declined to no more than 400,000 within Nigeria, but that still straddles the Benin–Nigeria border? How many millennia could it have taken to engender the common culture identified with the 30 to 40 million persons in the homeland alone, speaking some twenty-five forms of the Yorùbá language, with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility? How we answer these questions has consequences for the perceived stature of the two peoples discussed in this study, in the context of a fast-globalizing planet. The answer we proffer will determine the extent to which we assume responsibility for our existential reality: who we believe we are; who we accept as neighbours to whom we owe a duty of care; what fate has thrown us together; and how the resulting interpenetration has remade us before and since the Berlin Conference of 1884–85. These are no mere rhetorical questions. They are important because, as far as we can see, the future is infinite and our past conceptually finite, but both are enumerable. The time has come to turn to accessible phenomena and institutions in order to recover the crucial sense of our past; to reassess our present reality; and to chart our path to the future.

I suggest that the most reliable source of material for testing the plausibility and/or validity of the post-contact narratives of our essence is our lore, transmitted through language, and that we should interrogate and creatively re-enact our story for posterity. By ‘language’, I do not mean isolable morphemes and lexical items, although one may consider them symbols par excellence that embody significant memories. Despite being symbols par excellence, they unfortunately tend to codify only discrete etic meanings, and, for that reason, they travel very light. Linguistic processes and rules of grammar – to the extent that they, too, are definable – are also arbitrary. They, too, are therefore symbols. They should hold traces of our antecedents. Here again, however, I entertain a huge dose of scepticism. The phonological process of vowel harmony, for example, is a rule-governed linguistic gesture whose scope includes complexes of morphemes and/or whole phrases in languages. Vowel harmony, however, may arguably spread among contiguous languages with but scant regard for extra-linguistic conditioning. Therefore, like other rule-governed language gestures, it, too, offers limited insight into our past.

The kind of macro-linguistic items that I wish to consider below contain too many experiential components to be easily diffused outside tangible defining contexts. They encapsulate consequences for a people – and, certainly, for

peoples – in a situation of culture contact. I therefore propose that we interrogate critically the structure, reference and mode of functionality of each item. In the case of the Bààtonu and the Yorùbá, if we ask how long any set of such items may have taken to differ significantly from each other, if that is the case, or how long they took to acquire typological similarity, if not similarity of form, meaning and usage, we may have reason to be gratified by what we learn about these two peoples. And at least our meaning will be wholly ours.

But why should one undertake such a laborious task for the purpose of self-gratification about historical antecedence and relatedness? The passages at the beginning of this article offer us a compelling reason. Thus, the bard Homer suggests that the Greeks of at least the eighth century BCE were fully aware of, and traded with, the Ethiopians of the Abyssinian highlands. And we know that the Romans were aware that rich African kingdoms lay beyond Carthage and the land of the North African Garamantes. Robin Law (1980) conjectures that the Garamantes had horses in the fifth century BCE, and we know that the famous Carthaginian general Hannibal crossed the Alps into Italy with 26,000 troops, with 6,000 horses and with elephants during the Second Punic War, c.218 BCE. It is safe to suggest, therefore, that the lands that supplied Hannibal with elephants, lying south of Carthage, could have adopted horses without having to wait for them to be introduced by proselytizing Islamic invaders almost a millennium later.

We may assume, however, that this line of reasoning will end in a historical cul-de-sac, since it is not inconceivable that the irretrievable desiccation of the Sahara desert post-dated Hannibal,⁷ so that the land or lands that supplied him with elephants lay accessible to Carthage from the south. That would still not leave us with much to support a Persian origin for the Bààtonu, and certainly not an Egyptian or Judaic one for the Yorùbá. And we would still be interested in what the lore of both the Bààtonu and the Yorùbá allows us to deduce about their common and/or separate past.

Let us now interrogate macro-linguistic elements for an insight into what may lead us into the choppy waters of a plausible external history of our two peoples. Where I do not provide comparative data from both languages, I wish to suggest that, in most cases, the data adduced here will still be valuable for our objective. They will, hopefully at least, suggest leads for future inquiry.

The numeration system

What can we deduce from the data in [Table 1](#)? It is clear that, contrary to the impression that Sanúsí seeks to give (namely, that the Bààtonu numeration system is base five or quinary), the reality is not that simple. Bààtonu operates a system that, as in Yorùbá, combines a number of bases: five, ten and twenty (i.e. quinary, decimal and vigesimal). They both employ the arithmetical processes of addition and subtraction. It appears, however, that Bààtonu gives primacy to

⁷The date and rate of the desiccation depends on whether one considers it abrupt and due to changes in the Earth's orbit (see American Geophysical Union 1999), or attributes it to human activities (see Hays 2017).

TABLE 1
Bààtonu and Yorùbá numbers

English	Bààtonu	Yorùbá
one	<i>tía</i>	<i>ení</i>
two	<i>irū</i>	<i>èjì</i>
three	<i>íta</i>	<i>èta</i>
four	<i>nnē</i>	<i>èrin</i>
five	<i>nōḡbù</i>	<i>àrún</i>
six	<i>nōḡbù+kà+tía</i>	<i>èfà</i>
seven	<i>nōḡbù+kà+irū</i>	<i>èje</i>
eight	<i>nōḡbù+kà+íta</i>	<i>èjọ</i>
nine	<i>nōḡbù+kà+nnē</i>	<i>èsán</i>
ten	<i>ḡkūrū* nōḡbù+kà+nōḡbù</i>	<i>èwá</i>
eleven	<i>ḡkūrū+kà+tía</i>	<i>òkànláa (<òkan + lé+èwá)</i>
fourteen	<i>ḡkūrū+kà+nnē</i>	<i>èrinláa</i>
fifteen	<i>ḡkūrū+kà+nōḡbù ḡkūrūānōḡbù</i>	<i>èḡdógún (<èḡrúún + dín + ogún; aárúún + dín + ogún)</i>
twenty	<i>yēñdū</i>	<i>ogún</i>
twenty-five	<i>yēñdū+kà+nōḡbù yēñdānōḡbù</i>	<i>èḡdógbòṅ (èḡrúún + dín± ogbòṅ; aárúún + dín+ogbòṅ)</i>
twenty-six	<i>yēñdū+kà+nōḡbù+kà+tía yēñdānōḡbuátía; tēnañnesàrì⁸</i>	<i>èḡrindínlógbòṅ (èḡrin + dín + ní+ogbòṅ)</i>
thirty	<i>tēnā</i>	<i>ogbòṅ</i>
forty	<i>wèḡērū⁹</i>	<i>ogóji (ogún±èjì)</i>
fifty	<i>wèḡērāḡkūrū/wèḡērākūrū</i>	<i>áádòta (èwá+dín+òta <èwá±dín + ogún+èta)</i>
sixty	<i>wàtā¹⁰</i>	<i>ogóta</i>
seventy	<i>wàtāḡkūrū/wàtākūrū</i>	<i>áádòrin (èwá+dín+ogún+èrin)</i>
eighty	<i>wèṅē</i>	<i>ogórin</i>
ninety	<i>wèṅēḡkūrū/wèṅēākūrū</i>	<i>áádòríúún</i>
one hundred	<i>wùṅḡbù</i>	<i>ogóríúún</i>

* Note: This suggests that Bààtonu does not add identical denomination and does not, unlike Yorùbá, count and/or name denominations in multiples using the number units two to ten, as in *ogóji* and *ogóta*. Source: The Bààtonu data come from Sanúsí (n.d.).¹¹

addition anchored on base five. Our interest here is the historical – or diachronic – implication of the differences observable between the two systems. What is the direction of change?

⁸Sanúsí offers this formative on page 14 of his typescript (n.d.) and glosses it as ‘thirty four less’ (i.e. 30 – 4). He comments: ‘Even in some cases where the language considers a process of addition to be cumbersome, it uses subtraction as an alternative approach. For instance, instead of deriving “twenty-six” through the process of addition, the language may as well prefer a simpler method ... in which “four” is subtracted from thirty (the next number base).’

⁹Notice that Sanúsí omits to state that this term is derived from a sequence of formatives, the last of which is, without doubt, *irū*, ‘two’. This is very important, as the number names for multiples of twenty in both languages show.

¹⁰Again, a derived, complex lexical item with the formative ‘*tā*’ for ‘three’ as the final constituent.

¹¹We adopt Sanúsí’s convention of marking the middle tone for Bààtonu, with the macron above the orthographic element, but the Yorùbá orthographic symbols *ẹ* and *ọ* for the IPA *ɛ* and *ɔ*.

If we subscribe to the heuristic supposition that systems do not normally change by adopting less productive, less generalizable operations or rules, it would appear that the Bààtonu numeration system is innovatory in relation to the Yorùbá system. In this regard, contrary to Sanúsi's notion of simplicity, which favours the subtractive '*tènañnesàrí*', the longer '*yěñdū+kà+nṵṵbū+kà+tía*' is both analysable and more generalizable, as shown in Table 1. How many days, years or millennia could it have taken Bààtonu to achieve even the minimal change we observe here? Would the resulting timeline challenge the validity of the putative date of the Persian origin of the Bààtonu people and culture, or of the Semitic provenance of the Yorùbá people and culture?

It is, of course, conceivable that one or both of these peoples migrated to their present locations and then subscribed to the culture and symbolic codification of the first to arrive, or, through some unknowable conspiracy, to the culture of a third group that we need to identify. The data below would imply a conspiracy hypothesis, which posits an improbable assembly of sages of a given generation among both peoples agreeing on a list of selective adaptations within a given time frame.

Names and naming

One of the areal semiotic features of the Niger–Congo cultures (read 'languages') is the use of kinship terms to refer to the notion of constituency. For example, fingers are 'offsprings' of the hand, *omọ ọ ọwọ* in Yorùbá. In a similar fashion, terms for body parts are used metaphorically to codify notions of location: for example, *enu un ọnà*, 'mouth of pathway', for 'entrance' (Yorùbá: *enu* or 'mouth'); *etídò*, 'river ear', for 'river bank' (Yorùbá: *etí* or 'ear'); *ẹyin ọla*, 'back of tomorrow', for 'future'. Such areal features suggest that there might be a great deal more to gain from a systematic inquiry into macro-linguistic units, which gives folklorists no end of delight. I wish, therefore, to consider 'name' as the form, and 'naming' as its concomitant and culturally idiosyncratic ethnic or people-specific underpinning. I surmise that the names of people and the anthropocentric names of animals encapsulate world views and epistemological orientations of peoples; as a consequence, cognate relationships of form and meaning between any two distinct peoples based on these units should imply that there are more significant historical connections with diachronic implications than in cognate relationships distilled from discrete lexical items. In addition to these macro-units having referential meanings, each also defines the specific socio-psychological context of its usage. Since it is conceivable that one culture borrows only a form – or only a form and meaning – without its sociological context, a cognate relationship that includes the latter might suggest a more intensive or more sustained relationship over a greater length of time.

In this section, I present an overview of confirmable dog names, personal names and the nomenclature of interactions arising from kinship relationships among the Bààtonu and the Yorùbá. Within the Yorùbá group, Şàbẹ¹² presents us with direct

¹²I rely on Palau Martí (1992) and personal oral communication with Olábiyí Yai for Şàbẹ data. Neither of these sources, of course, is responsible for any misapprehension or misstatement in what follows.

cognate relationships with Bààtonu. Any extrapolation of historical period from these relationships should enable us to consider critically the duration of contact in relation to the putative fourteenth-century Bààtonu migration from Persia.¹³

First, the basis of naming in Yorùbá implied by the *òwe* (*èyínkùlè làá wò, ká tóó sọ ọmọ lórúko* or ‘it is the backyard we must look to first, before giving a child a name’) appears to be common to both peoples and cultures. One may read this much from Wendy Schottman’s observation:

Les noms baatonu contribuent également au renforcement de la structure sociale et à l’intégration de chaque individu dans cette structure. Ils permettent, par leur formulation et par les règles qui gèrent leur emploi, de reserrer les liens qui en ont le plus besoin. D’autres noms fournissent un support à la communication entre les puissances numineuses et les êtres vivants, en tant qu’acquiescement attentive ou élément d’une alliance propitiatoire. (Schottman *n.d.*)

Bààtonu names also contribute to strengthening social structure and integrating each individual within this structure. They allow, by their formulation and by the rules that govern their use, a tightening of the links that need it most. Other names provide support for communication between the numinous powers and living beings, as attentive acquiescence or as an element of a propitiatory alliance.

Of particular interest for this study is the fact that Šàbẹ́ alone among the Yorùbá group appears to have adopted sets of Bààtonu naming customs, complete with lexical items and the cultural specificities they codify. I present only two areas here: anthroponyms of twins and birth order terms; and dog names. Of interest would be the plausible time of contact between Bààtonu and Šàbẹ́, given the latter’s place in the myth of Yorùbá expansion as the most westerly of the sons of the people’s eponymous progenitor Odùduwà, who lived and ruled in Ifẹ̀ Oòdáyé (i.e. Ilẹ̀-Ifẹ̀).

Naming and order of birth

Consider the data in [Table 2](#).¹⁴ The list presents the names of boys and girls with the same mother by order of birth. As all my sources note, the restrictions of uterine order result in siblings by different mothers bearing the same names within the same family, if they occupy the same position in the order of birth of children by their respective mothers. Palau Martí says the following about the Šàbẹ́ lists in [Table 2](#):

Les noms de rang de naissance qui viennent d’être commentés représentent un emprunt au Bọkọ et au Borgou, ils existent à šàbẹ́ *mais sont totalement inconnus de tout autre groupe yoroubaphone*. (Palau Martí 1992, emphasis added)

¹³I hasten to add that, in this study, I am merely calling attention to areas in which to look for corroborations of any and all theories of origin of both the Bààtonu and the Yorùbá peoples, because much of the present data come from only one of the two, adducing references to studies to which greater and more assiduous access would certainly be of benefit.

¹⁴The Šàbẹ́ list provided by Olábiyí Yai (oral and personal communication) corresponds to Palau Martí’s (1992: 105), and the Bariba (Borgu) list from Palau Martí’s ‘informateurs Bariba’ agrees with Schottman’s (*n.d.*: 6). I have adopted Palau Martí’s list for the purposes of this study.

TABLE 2
Borgu and Šàbẹ names by order of birth

Boys		Girls	
Borgu	Šàbẹ	Borgu	Šàbẹ
<i>Woru</i>	<i>Wò(r)ú</i>	<i>Ñòṣon</i>	<i>Nòṣon</i>
<i>Sabi</i>	<i>Šàbí</i>	<i>Bona</i>	<i>Bónẹ</i>
<i>Biau</i>	<i>Biau</i>	<i>ŠakulBakẹ</i>	<i>Šàkú</i>
<i>Boni</i>	<i>BònilAgẹ</i>	<i>Ojo</i>	<i>Òjò</i>
<i>Dimon/Usani</i>	<i>Dimon</i>	<i>Dado</i>	<i>Bẹlú</i>
<i>Woru meru</i>	–	<i>BelulBero</i>	–

The names of birth rank that have been commented upon represent a loan to Bọkọ and Borgou; they exist in Šàbẹ *but are totally unknown in any other Yorùbaphone group.*

It is certainly remarkable that this kind of naming does not occur in any other Yorùbá subgroup. For example, Šàbẹ shares with the rest of the Yorùbá groups the giving of ‘order of birth’ names to twins and to single children born after a set of twins, except that, in Šàbẹ, another set of twins following a first set bear the names *Edon* or *Akan*.

Notice that the sixth male child in Borgu has an ‘order of birth’ name *Woru meru*, but no corresponding sixth name in Šàbẹ, even though the Borgu one is the first name modified by a determinant. Even with this difference, how do we explain the Šàbẹ accommodation with Borgu? Do inter-group marriages explain it? How long could it have taken Šàbẹ to adopt this kind of blanket borrowing? We know that Šàbẹ is geographically surrounded almost entirely by Borgu. Given the critical regard the Yorùbá have for personal names and naming, encapsulated in *orúkọ omọ ni ijánu omọ* (the name of a child is the child’s rein), what kind of cultural reorientation could account for this adoption?

If the ‘order of birth’ names have other referential meanings in Bààtonu, as Schottman (n.d.) suggests they do, do the same meanings carry over to Šàbẹ? Notice that Palau Martí takes care to mark the tones of the Šàbẹ forms but not the Bààtonu forms, perhaps in accordance with the conventional orthography of Bààtonu (see also Schottman n.d.). Does this suggest that the forms have other semantic references, even in Šàbẹ, than just the order of birth to the same mother? Again, one suspects that conclusions from these lines of inquiry would suggest a probable time of contact that pre-dates the fourteenth-century migration hypothesis.

Beyond names and numbers

The historical relationship between Šàbẹ and Bààtonu – and, by implication, between the entire Yorùbá group and Bààtonu – goes beyond names and naming. Consider kinship sociological terms and usage, for example. The term *iyakọ* (arguably derived from the noun phrase *iyá okọ*; literally, ‘mother of husband’) refers to a verbal play or joust between a woman married into a

family, on the one hand, and, on the other, the siblings of her husband or the children of other wives in the household who precede the woman in their residence in the household. Parties to this verbal play address light-hearted insults to each other about their relatives while staying within a recognized limit of decorum. The joust reinforces affective relationships among those involved in the banter. Those engaging in the joust are said to *je iyako* – literally, to ‘eat *iyako*’, as glossed above.

Now, consider what Palau Martí has to say about *gonèṣì* in Šàbè:

Je gonèṣì, litt., manger le *gonèṣì*: cette expression implique l’exercice de certains droits à l’encontre de l’associé *gonèṣì*; ces droits consistent en brimades et insultes qui peuvent dériver en voies de fait, mais c’est là le cas exceptionnel ...

En effect, ici le *gonèṣì* ne s’exerce jamais entre parents de sang; c’est la relation d’alliance qui doit se trouver à la base de ce mode d’association qui, par ailleurs, peut s’établir entre groups en dehors de toute référence à la parenté. (Palau Martí 1992)

Je gonèṣì, literally, ‘eat *gonèṣì*’: This expression refers to the custom that grants practical licence in face-to-face encounters among family members in relationships of *gonèṣì*. This licence consists of the apparent freedom to address to one another potentially embarrassing statements and insults, some of which, in exceptional cases, may be based on facts.

In reality, *gonèṣì* in this context never takes place among members related by blood; rather, relationships or ties by marriage may serve as the basis for association beyond anything that has to do with blood or birth.¹⁵

Strangely enough, the term *gonèṣì* is a Bààtonu loanword into Šàbè. Its Šàbè cultural content and practice differ significantly from its reference and importance in Bààtonu. According to Palau Martí (1992):

Dans le système de parenté bariba, la relation entre neveu et oncle maternel est valorisée, et le neveu peut s’approprier des biens de son oncle.

In the Bariba kinship system, the relationship between nephew and maternal uncle is valued, and the nephew can appropriate his uncle’s property.¹⁶

This suggests that, while *iyako* and *gonèṣì* refer to homologous sociological phenomena – that is, to banter between cross-cousins or in-laws – that are common to Šàbè and other Yorùbá subgroups, participants in *gonèṣì* may be restricted among the Bààtonu as defined above.

In any event, it is not insignificant that *gonèṣì* or *iyako*, complete with cognate predicates such as *je*, which, in Yorùbá, may invariably be glossed as ‘eat’, ‘enjoy’ or ‘take part in’, is a sociological custom that characterizes cultures and traditions across the Sahara–Sahelian sub-region of West Africa, as Table 3 indicates.¹⁷

¹⁵ Author’s translation.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing to my attention the scope of this custom in West Africa, and its humanistic import which impressed UNESCO to declare it to be of world heritage value. Given the West Africa heritage in the Americas, there can be no doubt that ‘The Dozens’ owes its origin to this West African antecedent (see Dollard 1990; Wald 2012).

TABLE 3
Parenté à plaisanterie: in-laws' verbal jousting in West Africa

Country	People/language	Term for verbal jousting
Mali	Mali	sinankunya
Burkina Faso	Mossi	rakiré
Côte d'Ivoire		toukpê
Senegal	Soninkés	kalungoraxu
Guinea, Nigeria, Mali	Halpulaaren (Fula)	dendiraaagal; shedseñ ¹⁸
Senegal	Sérèrs	kalir
Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania	Wolofs	kal
Benin, Nigeria	Bààtonu	gonèsi
Benin	Şàbè (Yorùbá)	gonèsi
Nigeria	Yorùbá	iyako

Source: Table based on <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parenté_à_plaisanterie>.

Indeed, its cross-cultural features in common and its humanizing function persuaded UNESCO to declare this West African 'institution' an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'.¹⁹

Our interest here, again, lies in how to account for this relationship between the Bààtonu and the Yorùbá peoples. What was the intensity of the relationship and contact that resulted in the kind of transfer of form, meaning and usage that can be observed, when a perfectly transparent terminology exists in the borrowing language to express what Şàbè shared with other Yorùbá group members rather than with Bààtonu, the donor language and culture? It is perhaps not farfetched to attribute such a pattern of borrowing to an association that cannot be recent (post-fourteenth century). More importantly, neither *iyako* nor *gonèsi* has a known reflection or cognate in any identifiable Middle Eastern tradition.

Dog names

The dog is a special member of the Yorùbá family, and not just in the way that a pet would be, like a tortoise or a parrot. By virtue of its special place in the Yorùbá family, the dog is not normally regarded as a source of meat, although a divinity such as Ògún (*òrìṣà* of all creative expressions) may, on special occasions, demand a dog as a sacrifice. Similarly, some momentous occasions even demanded human sacrifices in the Yorùbá past. Although dog names among the Yorùbá do not reflect the circumstances of the birth of the animal, as names of people do, they too encode the messages, admonitions, advice, aspirations and desires of their human owners and/or their families. Dog names often take the form of axiomatic gnomic expressions, as shown in Table 4.

In addition, there are purely descriptive names that relate to the colour of the dog's coat: *afun* (one that is white/blond) and *adu* (one that is black).

¹⁸See Bintou Day, 'Festival "sinankunya" by Santos: a use of sources', Malisnews.com, 7 April 2016.

¹⁹UNESCO, 'Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee: 9.COM 10.31', Paris, 2014 <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/décisions/9.COM/10.31>>.

TABLE 4
Yorùbá dog names

Name	Literal English translation
Reproach	
<i>sùúrù</i>	patience (likely an Arabic loan into Yorùbá)
<i>ṣòro/èniyàn ṣòro</i>	complex/humans are complex (humans are difficult)
<i>ìwà</i>	character, mode of existence, behaviour
Advice	
<i>òrò-ń-bẹ-lẹyìn</i>	matter (<i>logos</i>) remains hereafter
<i>ta-n-tòlòun (ta ni tò Olòrun?)</i>	who is as great as the Lord of the beyond?
<i>ẹyìn-là-á-rò (ẹyìn ni à á rò)</i>	after an event is what one must give thought to
<i>ká-dúrò-tòlòun</i>	let us wait on the Lord of the beyond
<i>ojù ti ẹlẹgàn</i>	the mocker is put to shame
<i>ká-wò/ká-rò</i>	let us ponder

The dog serves many purposes in the Yorùbá homestead. It is a faithful companion, a hunting partner, counsellor, baby's playmate and guard, and a cleaner in various circumstances. As the Yorùbá òwe goes: *A ki i mo orúkọ alájá, ká pa á jẹ* (One does not know the name of the owner of a dog and still kill it for meat). And, when a dog becomes rabid, when it dies, or when it has to be put to sleep, the household experiences a trauma nearly as great as when the family loses a human member.

If a systematic inquiry into dog names and the culture of human–animal relations beyond mere ecological coexistence among the Yorùbá and the Bààtonu reveals a commonality that is also particular to the two groups or to the sub-region to which both belong, we would again like to use its conclusions to interrogate hypotheses about the external history of both peoples. I surmise that such an interrogation would be unlikely to corroborate the hypothesis of a Middle Eastern origin that is anywhere near as recent as existing historical conjectures propose.

Dog names among the Bààtonu²⁰

Wendy Schottman (1993) provides a fascinating study of Bààtonu dog names and naming. Her study²¹ strengthens our case for deep and sustained historical relatedness among the Bààtonu and the Yorùbá cultures and peoples and renders implausible the argument for a 'Kisra legend [of] a migration story shared by a number of political and ethnic groups in modern Nigeria, Benin,

²⁰I acknowledge here the suggestion by a reviewer of this study not to leave the Bààtonu dog story either to the reader's imagination or to a possible future investigator whose interest may have nothing to do with compelling history and historians to be searching, explanatory and plausible.

²¹It may be rewarding to read Schottman's two articles – 'Proverbial dog names of the Baatombu' (1993) and 'Baatonu personal names from birth to death' (2000) – together.

and Cameroon, primarily the Borgu kingdom and the people of the Benue River valley' as recently as the seventh century AD.²²

As with the Yorùbá people, the dog is an integral agent of tradition among the Bààtonu, an intimate existential partner, and not just a mere member of domestic livestock. The term '*sekuru*' in the Bààtonu language (Schottman 1993) has the double meaning of 'shame' or 'embarrassment' and 'modesty', 'respectfulness', 'deference' or even 'timidity'. In the Yorùbá language, the nominalized predicate '*itijú*' ('i=ti-ojú', from the nominalizer prefix *i* + predicate *ti* ['push down'] + *ojú* ['eye']) has exactly the same double meaning.

From Schottman (1993), modesty and the care taken not to offend anyone and/or cause embarrassment to other people, no matter their status in relation to the speaker, make the culture invest in dogs as a language surrogate by using gnomic expressions when a dog's name is not based on its coat colour or on any other physical trait. Thus, calling one's dog by name delivers the message inherent in its name to all hearers, including the one for whom the speaker intends the message.²³ Schottman puts it this way:

This diplomatic way of expressing oneself when a difference arises is doubly indirect: (a) The dog's owner makes use of a pseudo-addressee (the dog), and (b) the message is formulated with a proverb, therefore with words of which the owner is not the author. (Schottman 1993: 539)

Schottman explains further:

The use of a proverbial dog's name to communicate with a neighbor is a strategy which, although doubly indirect, remains rather transparent. Its transparency results primarily from the high degree of conventionalism of this use of proverbs. The overt communicative act, that of calling one's dog by the animal's name, is perfectly credible; hence this strategy offers little protection to the speaker. (Schottman 1993: 545)

Table 5 provides gnomic expressions that recall the Yorùbá instances of dog names in Table 4.²⁴

The point should be made that we have called 'gnomic expressions' what Schottman refers to as 'proverbs', largely because a proverb does not normally subscribe to the 'truth' test, whereas gnomic expressions empirically do so within the culture that generates them. In this sense, dog names in both Table 4 and Table 5 are empirically valid in Yorùbá and Bààtonu respectively. And this transcultural validity is not accidental; rather, it speaks to the deep historical relatedness of the two cultures, which would hardly be the case in an argument based on the Kisra legend of migration, or on any other legend.

²²For a brief account of this myth, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kisra_legend>.

²³For the purposes of this study, it is significant that Nzankara, Gbeya, Kasina and Ewe also have similar dog-naming customs, as is referenced by Schottman (1993) in relation to cultures in the same sub-region.

²⁴For items taken directly from Schottman (1993), I have substituted the Yorùbá orthographic symbols *ẹ* and *ọ* for the IPA symbols *ɛ* and *ɔ* respectively throughout.

TABLE 5
Bààtonu dog names

Name	Literal English translation
Reproach ²⁵	
<i>Tonũ sê</i>	People are difficult
<i>Yãdũmũ</i>	The world (life) is difficult
<i>Durom mũ tẽ</i>	When goodness is overdue, (it's because) the idiot has forgotten
<i>Durom mũ kpa</i>	There is no more goodness
Warning or advice	
<i>Ya duura</i>	What you have sown
<i>Ya kua</i>	What you have done
<i>Daa ya mō</i>	The behaviour that you have
<i>A n tẽmãñã</i>	If you persevere
<i>Wããru suuru</i>	Life is patience
<i>Tãki kpa</i>	Teasing is finished

The story the horse tells

From the story of the horse, we can interpret both the collective (contact) and separate external and internal histories of the Bààtonu and Yorùbá peoples; this is at least as intriguing as what can be deduced from the points made above, and it certainly may point to the consequences of the inquiry suggested above. The fundamental question is the following: when did each or both of the peoples know about horses? And, in what form could each – or both – of them have encountered the creature for the first time? As Yorùbá scholars, our point of departure ought to have been to ask Òrúnmilá, if we were not still roaming the wilderness in intellectual and physical exile:

<i>Òrúnmilá, Ajàná, Bara, Àgbònrègún</i>	Òrúnmilá, Ajàná, Bara, Àgbònrègún
<i>Ódodo ilé ayé, òpitàn ilé Ifẹ̀</i>	essential data of the universe, custodian of the account of the earth of Ifẹ̀
<i>Ènì mojò aláṣirè maa tán</i>	one who knows the time of the exit stage of life
<i>Òkúnrin dúdú òkèè Gẹ̀tí</i> ²⁶	black lord of mount Gẹ̀tí

In the absence of Ifá's counsel, we must turn to the lore of both peoples as codified in macro-linguistic units such as *òwe* (commonly glossed as 'proverbs'), riddles, idioms and *oriki*, and to usages that contextualize these units in the life of the people. What follows is an invitation to a systematic inquiry that should either yield fresh plausible explanations for issues relating to our common history or confirm existing ones. The Yorùbá data presented below represent the tip of the iceberg, if for no other reason than that we have not been able to conduct the necessary fieldwork, not even for Yorùbá alone. I therefore do no more than raise questions to which later inquiry may offer answers.

²⁵All of the items in this table, along with their glossal notes, are taken from Schottman (1993: 548f).

²⁶Olóyè Fábùnmi in Oyèláràn and Adéwọ̀lé (2007).

First, I must pay tribute to that erudite and disciplined work *The Horse in West African History* (Law 1980). The work challenges us to gather systematic data so that we may put many issues beyond the realm of mere speculation. There is hardly any aspect of the history of the horse that its author, Robin Law, leaves untouched. I shall start with what appears to be Law's conclusion. He writes, on the basis of a careful consideration of the evidence:

More generally, the great diversity of West African equine vocabulary with its large number of apparently unrelated roots, tends to suggest that the spread of the horses within West Africa took place in relatively remote times.

What can be said with certainty is that horses were already established in West Africa at the time when contemporary Arabic sources from North Africa, Spain, and Sicily begin to tell us something about conditions there, from the ninth or tenth century A.C. onwards. (Law 1980)

Law finds that the Borgu term for horse, *duma*, is cognate only to the Gurma term *ontamu*. This would appear to suggest that Borgu does not share a micro-linguistic codification for the horse (as in Table 6) and the animal's tradition with Mande or with the Kwa-speaking peoples whose territories are found on the Atlantic Ocean coast in West Africa.

The list in Table 6 suggests that some equine mammals were common to these West African groups at some point in time. Whether or not Borgu experienced these differences in lexical codification should be clear from a study of larger linguistic units such as the Yorùbá ones in Table 6. I have no doubt that data from a more systematic inquiry will make us marvel at how a contact purportedly limited to less than eight centuries and based solely on the military use of the horse could have penetrated as deeply into the sinews of Yorùbá customs and their world view as these expressions, usages and institutional contexts indicate. If Bààtonu had comparable experiences with the horse, as similar materials may suggest, then what would the inferred time frame allow us to conclude about the history of the people and their contact with the Yorùbá?

The horse in Yorùbá art

The pre-eminence of representations of the horse in modern Yorùbá visual art defies explanation, if we assume that contact with the horse occurred as late as the ninth century CE. The presupposition that the military use of the horse from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century in intra-group wars impressed the figure of the animal so indelibly on the reality of the people leaves many questions unanswered. Why, for example, does the horse enjoy prominence in the wood carvings of Eastern Yorùbá, an area that the cavalries of the various invaders hardly reached? The artistic representation of the horse features in the palace of the Ọba of Benin for ceremonial purposes, in a setting where horsemanship appeared to call for extra precautions to ensure the security of the ruler. Certainly, non-military visual representations of the horse require explanation in such a setting, in the absence of putative belated sixteenth- to nineteenth-century contact with the animal.

Equally intriguing is the appearance of representations in Ifá objects, along with linguistic expressions codifying the significance of such appearances. For instance,

TABLE 6
Comparative terms for ‘equine’ in West African languages

Language/language group	Lexical item for ‘horse’
Mande	
Soninké	<i>sí</i>
Malinke, Bamabara, Vai, Boko-Bura	<i>so</i>
Busansi	<i>sis</i>
Susu	<i>sona</i>
Temne	<i>asoe</i>
Bulom	<i>osoe</i>
Kisi and Grebo	<i>so</i>
Kru	<i>sou</i>
Kwa	
Èwe and Fon	<i>so</i>
Yorùbá	<i>ẹ̀sìn</i>
Edo	<i>esi</i>

the divinatory tray, *opón Ifá*, has four major quadrants. The lower left quadrant is *afurùkèrèṣayò*, ‘one who engenders happiness using the fly whisk’ – assuming, that is, that *irùkèrè* refers to a ‘fly whisk’ made of a horse’s tail. It is, of course, conceivable that the identification of *irùkèrè* with Ifá is a later transfer of a reference to the tail of some other animal, with the function similarly transferred to that of the horse. The term *irù* glosses as ‘tail’ without reference to any specific animal. Furthermore, Yorùbá Ọba – who, according to tradition, may wear the beaded crown – carry *irùkèrè* imbued with their *àṣẹ*, their ‘mythic power’ or ‘life force’, whenever they are in a position to exercise or dispense that power, such as when seated in state, on ritual occasions, or on formal outings to acknowledge their subjects and bless them. Their *irùkèrè* is, however, made from *ròrò àgbò*, ‘the mane of a white ram’, and never from the tail of a horse or of any other animal. We know, of course, that the ram, *àgbò*, and not the horse, occupies an important place in the Yorùbá myth of origin. The ram, or possibly some mythical person metonymically named *àgbò*, is Ifá’s mythical customs officer. It would therefore appear conceivable that the predicate *furùkèrèṣayò* connotes the diviner’s *àṣẹ*, which he may deploy with a gesture with *irùkèrè* to command, with efficacy, a material base or socio-psychological ambiance for joy for both the diviner and the supplicant.

One cannot so easily dismiss the representation of the horse on Ifá art objects. For one thing, the lexical formative *irù* in *irùkèrè* in animal anatomy refers strictly to the tail.²⁷ To the extent, therefore, that the Ọba’s *irùkèrè* is made of the mane of

²⁷While Drewal and Mason (1998: 222) correctly identify *irù* as ‘tail’, the meaning they assign *kèrè* is erroneous. Bowen (1858) assigns this to the category ‘noun’ and records ‘a simpleton’ as its meaning. In the language today, *kèrè* still has the connotation of Bowen’s gloss, and is understood as ‘to be inferior; to be diminished’. *Sopè kò kèrè ni idi ayò* implies that ‘Sopè is by no means a novice at the game of *ayò*’. It therefore seems that Drewal and Mason’s (1998) remark that ‘[t]he whisk made from a horse’s tail suggests images of military and royal might’ may apply to *irù ẹ̀sìn*, ‘the tail of a horse’, and not to Ọba and *babaláwo*’s symbol of mystic authority. By the same token, we should understand that the application of the term *irùkèrè* to ‘the tail of a horse’ must have arisen from a sociolinguistic ‘back-formation’. Consider that when an *oriki* line says

a white ram, that term may be argued to properly refer to Ọba's item of power; only analogically and, because of the force of its application in the hands of Ọba and *babaláwo*, did it come to refer to a horse's tail, for reasons of morphological similarity.²⁸ This argument suggests that the presence of the horse in the Yorùbá tradition pre-dates the tradition of Ọba, and, *ipso facto*, it also pre-dates the association of the beaded crown with the *àṣẹ*, which the Ọba dispenses with *irùkèrè* (see Figure 1). Notice that the Ọba's *irùkèrè* is invariably white, as opposed to the sombre colour of the horse's tail. This confirms that the Ọba's *irùkèrè* (even that of Lóbùn, a woman Ọba) is made from the mane of rams.

After the Ọba, Ifá priests are the next most prominent group of people who use the *irùkèrè* as a symbol of their priesthood and of their power to dispense *àṣẹ* like an Ọba, albeit only at divinatory and formal sessions. A verse from an *àyájọ* (incantation), cited by Abiódún (2014: 139)²⁹ in appreciating the Zollman *àgéré*, confirms this:

Bí babaláwo méjì bá pàdẹ
Wón a ṣe irùkèrè wón yeturuyeturu

Whenever two Ifá priests meet,
 They wave their horsetail fly whisk in salutation/They wave their *irùkèrè* 'full-fluff' in acknowledgement³⁰

The exceptionally long *irùkèrè* in this *àgéré* Ifá makes a strong visual statement and suggests its verbal corollary from *ofò* (incantation), another authoritative Yorùbá source:

Ó dà ko kùnkùndùkú tíi ṣolòjà iṣu
Ọn irùkèrè tíi ṣomọ Olókun Ṣẹniadẹ
Wón ni bó bá yẹ 'rùkèrè tán, tó dẹ 'rùkèrè lórìn,
Ó deni à-gbè-jò, ó deni à-gbà-yèwò.
À-gbè-jò láá gbé 'rù eṣin
À-gbà-yèwò ni tí 'rùkèrè'³¹

It was divined for *kùnkùndùkú* [sweet potato] who is the king of yams,
 And the horsetail who was the child of Olókun Ṣẹniadẹ [Creator God]
 It was predicted that by the time the horsetail had become famous and prosperous
 He would become the focus of attention.
 He danced carrying the horsetail.
 We respect the horsetail in admiration³²

'*Ó gún bí irù eṣin*' (He/she is comely and trim like the tail of a horse), it can never be said of the person '*Ó gún bí irùkèrè eṣin*'.

²⁸The tassel of an ear of corn is also *irùkè* in Yorùbá, again from a morphological similarity, this time to *irùkèrè* and not to 'the tail of a horse'. See also Bowen's (1858) dictionary.

²⁹I wish to acknowledge Rowland Abiódún in calling our attention to this and to the following excerpt of *ofò*. We wish to absolve him of any and all infelicitous use or interpretation we make of these texts.

³⁰Abiódún's translation.

³¹In the excerpt: *irùkèrè*, 'emerging from the depth'; *ṣomọ Olókun Ṣẹniadẹ*, 'aspires to the position of distinction of *olòjà*' or 'ruler', among emblems of *àṣẹ*, which *kùnkùndùkú* occupies among yams.

³²Abiódún's translation.



FIGURE 1A (a) Lóbùn (or Qlóbùn) of Ońdó (also called ‘Qba obinrin).
Source: Abíódún (2014: 110).

We recalibrate some lines of the *ofò* as follows:

Wọ̀n ní bó bá yẹ̀ ‘rùkẹ̀rẹ̀ tán,

tó dẹ̀ ‘rùkẹ̀rẹ̀ lọ̀rùn

Ò dẹ̀ni à-gbẹ̀-jó,

ó dẹ̀ni à-gbà-yẹ̀wò.

À-gbẹ̀-jó làà gbé ‘rù ẹ̀şin

A-gbà-yẹ̀wò ní tí ‘rùkẹ̀rẹ̀

They say when *irùkẹ̀rẹ̀* becomes honoured and recognized

when *irùkẹ̀rẹ̀* becomes comfortable in itself

then it becomes one to-carry-dancing³³

then it becomes one to-carry-consult/interrogate

carrying-dancing it is one carries tail of horse

carrying-consulting/interrogating it is one carries *irùkẹ̀rẹ̀*

³³‘One to-carry-dancing’ or carry for ritual purposes/for performance.



FIGURE 1B The Oba of Baporo sits in state with *adehla* and beaded fly whisk during the Ògún Ogenegene festival, Ijèbu-Yorùbá. Source: Drewal and Mason (1998: 55).

In divinatory settings, one says ‘*E yè mí wò*’, ‘Please, interrogate my lot.’ Also consider *àyèwò*, which connotes a diagnostic process, or a process of systematic inquiry, when asserted before a physician, an Ifá cognoscente, or anyone equipped with the competence to make prescriptions, with an acknowledged measure of credibility, following a thorough diagnosis. If, as Abíódún (2014: 139) states, the *irùkèrè* on Zollman *àgéré* Ifá is ‘exceptionally long’, then it must be from the tail of a horse, and is called *irùkèrè* due to its morphological resemblance to the type carried by *babaláwo* and Oba. The *irùkèrè* from the horse’s tail is most suitable for ritual performance purposes, but is unsuitable for *babaláwo* to acknowledge one another at solemn moments, or for dispensing and/or asserting the *àṣẹ* or ‘effective power’, which they alone may deploy during the process of



FIGURE 1C *Ìrùkèrè ilèkè* (paired beaded fly whisk). These would have been worn around the neck like the linked *edan* of Òṣùgbó elders. Source: Drewal and Mason (1998: 223).

divination. Furthermore, the *yeturuyeturu* motion of the *babaláwo*'s *irùkèrè* is not a ritual motion; rather, it is a symbolic gesture, imbued with power, made by someone who is privy to the mystery of Ifá to another, from *babaláwo* to clients for *àṣẹ*. We must accept the powerful symbolism of *àṣẹ* in the hands of the *Ọba* and the *babaláwo* as 'diminutive *irù*', or *irù tí ó kèrè* – literally, 'a tail that is diminutive'. Its nimbleness makes it easy for those entitled to use it to handle it with dignity and grace.

The separate primordial ritual function of the horse's tail further underscores our conclusion that the horse must be present in the deep and remote history of Yorùbá tradition and culture, and is less likely to have arrived with more recent migration, or with the military adventurism of jihadists.³⁴

³⁴*Ìrù ẹ̀ṣin*, 'tail of a horse', features in Yorùbá funeral rituals, but not the *irùkèrè* of an *Ọba* or of a *babaláwo*. The *àṣẹ* gestural use of the 'ram-mane' *irùkèrè* in the hands of an *Ọba* took over from its similar use by *babaláwo*. Notice that not all presumed sons of Odùdùwà, the presumed initiator of the political role of *Ọba*, use the 'ram-mane' *irùkèrè* for *àṣẹ* gestures. By extrapolation, therefore, it may be suggested that the *Ọba*'s *irùkèrè* and its use are based on older antecedents: the



FIGURE 1D Chief S. L. Omiṣadé, the Ọbalúfẹ́ (Ọrúntọ́ or Ọ̀ni Ọ̀de, prime minister equivalent of Ifẹ́). Source: Abiṓdún (2014: 151).³⁵

This is not all. Rowland Abiṓdún (1975) notes that the ‘sculpture and apparatus of Ifá range from natural unadorned objects such as *ikin* (sacred palm-kernel nuts) to the highly sophisticated and sculptured *àgéré Ifá* (a wooden vessel with lid) for housing *ikin*. Whereas the horse does not feature among the animals represented on *ọpọ̀n Ifá*, Abiṓdún (*ibid.*: 449) describes *àgéré Ifá* as follows:

The figures in the sculpture of *àgéré* are ordinary men responding humanly and naturally to the success of their supplication. In the conventional way they drum, sing, and dance with horse-tail fly-whisk in hand, ride on horseback with or without a weapon (in the case of victory in war or success of a similar nature), and make ritual sacrifice to express their gratitude to *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*.

Other references suggest further that both the horse and the reading of *irùkẹ̀rẹ̀* as the tail of the horse may be primordial in the Ifá tradition. Thus, *babaláwo* or ‘Ifá exponents’, commonly referred to as ‘diviners’, wish for and express ultimate success by riding a horse when practising their profession: *ẹ̀ṣin ni n ọ̀ò máa gùn ẹ̀ṣawo* (the horse it is I will ride to dispense the mystery of essence and existence).

former on the vehicle – the tail of the horse – as ‘diminutive *irù*’; the latter on the function of *irùkẹ̀rẹ̀* in the hand of *babaláwo*.

³⁵Permission and assistance with the photographs provided by Henry Drewal and Rowland Abiṓdún.

TABLE 7
Phrases relating to horses and their equipment

Òwe (proverbs)	
<i>Orùkọ̀ ọmọ̀ ní ìjánu ọmọ̀</i>	A child's name is the child's bridle
<i>Akekèè dì gààrì, ó kú ẹ̀nì tí òò gẹ̀şin</i>	The scorpion packs a saddle, but who dares to ride it as a horse?
<i>Dièdiè ní ẹ̀şin í kú`</i>	The horse dies little by little
Metaphors	
<i>Kó ní ìjánu</i>	To rein in; to control
<i>Gún ní kẹ̀şé</i>	To prick with the spur; to spur into action
<i>Di gààrì</i>	To be armed and spoiling for a fight

Furthermore, in putting a value on Ifá objects, beaded *irùkèrè* (1,200 cowries) ranks after only *àgèrè* (at 3,200 cowries) and *iròkè*, the usually ornately adorned ivory tapper used to invoke Ọ̀rúnmìlà at the start of a consultation.

In short, at worst one cannot conclude that the horse has *not* always been associated with Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the only divinity in the Yorùbá pantheon present at creation and the acknowledged custodian of the account, *logòs*, of all objects of consciousness, including thoughts. If the horse enjoys that association, how remote could its appearance in the Yorùbá world be? We know that the Ewe-Fon of the Benin littoral have *Fá*, a system of geomancy that is accepted as cognate with the Yorùbá Ifá. Do Bààtonu have a similar system? If they do, is the horse as closely associated with *Fá* as it is with the Yorùbá Ifá? If the answer is as uncertain as is the case for Ifá, then we have good grounds to find corroborating evidence here too, in the lore of both peoples, in order to argue for a remote antiquity in their association – and this certainly renders nonsensical a Middle Eastern or an Asia Minor migration to West Africa.

The horse in Yorùbá discourse and material culture

Equine equipment

The bridle, spur and saddle are basic to horsemanship, including the military use of the horse. The three terms gloss as follows in Yorùbá: *ìjánu* (<i-já-enu, 'that which is used to pick the mouth'), *kẹ̀şé* and *gààrì*.

Of the three terms, only *ìjánu* is morphemically analysable in Yorùbá; the remaining two are arguably loan words. Bridles were widely used in the region in the pre-Islamic period, when they served purposes other than military, and horsemanship was hardly a professional skill. Linguistic usages, such as those in Table 7, would appear to confirm the relative antiquity of the bridle.

The Yorùbá world view and epistemology that undergird traditional names and naming inform the *òwe* in Table 7, while the very concept of *omólúwàbí* (Awoniyi 1975; Abimbola 1975) gives force to the *ìjánu* metaphor. In both *òwe* and metaphors, the remaining two entries have more mundane semantically simplex connotations. *Ìjánu* expressions point to a pristine contact with the vehicle they refer to: namely, the horse. Their origin, too, may lie in the lap of Ifá. Not so the other two sets: *kẹ̀şé* and *gààrì*.

TABLE 8
Names that incorporate the horse and rider predicates

<i>Eṣin</i> (horse) in names	Rider predicate in naming	Alien contact naming
<u><i>Geṣindé</i></u>	<i>Abògùundé</i>	<i>Oládèèbó (Oládòyìnbó)</i>
Ride-horse-arrive	One with Ògún arrive	Olá-become-whiteman
<u><i>Gbadéḡeṣin</i></u>	<u><i>Gbòlagùnté</i></u>	<u><i>Ògùntòyìnbó</i></u>
Carry-crown-ride horse	Carry-Ọlá-ride-throne	Ògún-equals-whiteman
<u><i>Kéṣinró</i></u>	<u><i>Gbáderó</i></u>	<u><i>Ọdètòyìnbó</i></u>
Pack-horses-stand ready	Carry-crown-stand ready	Hunter-equals-whiteman
	<u><i>Móyèro</i></u>	<u><i>Àyàntòyìnbó</i></u> ³⁶
	Hold-oyè-stand ready	Àyàn-equals-whiteman

The horse and rider predicate in personal names and naming

I have invoked the primordial nature of names and naming among the Yorùbá and the Bààtonu. Consider, now, in Table 8, names that incorporate the horse and rider predicates, particularly in the Yorùbá culture.

Apart from names of children born with peculiar presentations through the uterine passage – for example, *igè*, ‘foot-first orientation’ – or with unusual physical features such as extra digits (*olúgbòdì*) or with locks of hair (*dàda*), most Yorùbá names are either whole clauses or, as a minimum, simplex predicates. Names in column three involve simple, uni-lexical predicates – *dà*, ‘to develop into or become’, and *tó*, ‘become equal to’ – while the complement or object in each case is *òyìnbó*, ‘white person’. Names in columns one and two, on the other hand, feature complex predicates, usually referred to as a serial verb construction (the verbs underlined); this is perhaps the distinctive syntactic feature of the languages of the sub-region of Borgu and Yorùbá. Furthermore, whereas the names in column three challenge the pride of the stranger, those in one and two memorialize the cultural landscape or express the hopes and aspirations of the family at the arrival of the child. The occurrences of *eṣin*, in column one participate in the latter. These instances of *eṣin* in naming suggest an antiquity that points to anteriority to the Bààtonu and Yorùbá encounter with white people, which occurred at the earliest in the fifteenth century CE.

The horse in *òwe* (proverbs)

The pervasiveness of occurrences of the horse in *òwe*, commonly inadequately glossed as ‘proverbs’, most cogently raises the issue of the antiquity of the contact of the Yorùbá with the animal, and/or the intensity and extent of the

³⁶In play in these names are the names of *òrìṣà* (divinities), Ògún (of the arts), Ọlá (revered social status), Ọdẹ (‘hunter’, metonymically Ògún, since hunters use and are knowledgeable in fashioned implements, for cultivation, the arts and war), Àyàn (of music and the drum as a language surrogate), and *Òyìnbó* (white person and all that he or she stands for in the course of their historical contact with the Yorùbá, in particular hubris and presumed superiority).

impact of that contact, but pays scant regard to the duration of that experience. The argument dating the horse–Yorùbá contact to the Islamic period puts a great deal of weight on the presumed intense trauma and/or triumph of military escapades and adventures. When we turn to perhaps the most enduring codification of the people’s historical experience distilled into communicable minuscule details with the force of each *Odu Ifá*, we find ourselves called upon to exercise the utmost intellectual responsibility before reaching any conclusion.

Consider that the Yorùbá pack the force, rationale, delivery, context and reception of the horse *òwe* in the following text:

òwe ẹ̀ṣin ọ̀rò
bí ọ̀rò bá sọ̀nù
òwe la fi í wá a

òwe (proverb) is the horse of discourse
if the discourse miscarries
òwe it is one uses to recover it

At this stage of our inquiry, it is unrealistic to pretend to be able to make any definitive statement about the scope of the horse *òwe* in Yorùbá, as there exists at least one horse *òwe* for every facet of Yorùbá reality or thought. We will content ourselves with this one robust example to support our supposition about the antiquity of the horse among the people.

Conventional wisdom does not dispute the antiquity of the genetic relationship between the Yorùbá and the Igbo peoples. Yet, where the Yorùbá say ‘*òwe ẹ̀ṣin ọ̀rò*’, the Igbo say ‘the proverb is the palm oil with which the yam is eaten’ (Achebe 1958). Is it the indigenous status of the oil palm and its multifarious life-sustaining uses that lend force to the Igbo proverb, or the recent export value, enhanced by the perceived superiority of the colonial exploiters? Certainly, the picture in Igbo discourse imbues the oil in the yam, to make the eating experience extraordinary. To extrapolate from the Igbo discourse, whereas the *babaláwo* aspires to ride a horse to material success and recognition – note, not to efficacy in divining – in the horse *òwe*, the discourse and not the speaker is in the saddle. This makes plausible the recoverability of the reference, when, due to human foible, the discourse which *òwe* innervates with force miscarries.

In order to underscore the fundamental nature of the presence and force of the horse in Yorùbá *òwe*, I examined Owomoyela (1988). Out of 875 entries of substantives that serve as a vehicle for instances of *òwe*, I identified fourteen occurrences of the term *ẹ̀ṣin* (horse), and the same number for *aṣọ* (cloth), *adiẹ* (chicken) and *odò* (river or stream) (see Table 9). This suggests that *ẹ̀ṣin*, too, ought to be counted among the items of primordial significance to the people and its culture.

Out of the fourteen occurrences of *òwe ẹ̀ṣin* or ‘horse proverbs’, only four pertain to power, wealth and/or material well-being; the remaining concern interpersonal relationships. One may therefore suggest that the force of the horse *òwe* has more to do with the graphic nature of its presence in human relational experience than with power relations and wealth. Even where power and authority are concerned, the horse *òwe* empowers both the source of the information and the people as the ultimate fountainhead of authority, as the phrases below suggest:

TABLE 9
The presence of the horse in Yorùbá òwe

Term	Translation	Number of occurrences
<i>ojú</i>	eye	43
<i>omọ</i>	child/component unit	36
<i>àgbà</i>	elder	26
<i>orí</i>	head	26
<i>ilé</i>	house/home	20
<i>ajá</i>	dog	19
<i>ọwọ</i>	hand	18
<i>iná</i>	fire	16
<i>enu</i>	mouth/access point	15
<i>erù</i>	load/burden	15
<i>omọdè</i>	youth/child	15
<i>adiẹ</i>	chicken	14
<i>aşọ</i>	cloth/clothes	14
<i>eşin</i>	horse	14
<i>odò</i>	river/stream	14
<i>obinrin</i>	woman	12
<i>erin, àjànàkú</i>	elephant	12
<i>ayè</i>	world/the earth	11
<i>baba</i>	father	11
<i>eye</i>	bird	11
<i>ilẹ</i>	earth/the ground	11
<i>ọnà</i>	road/path	11
<i>işu</i>	tuber/yam	10
<i>àgbò</i>	the ram	7
<i>ahun</i>	tortoise	6

eşin pòpòrò kì í mọ̀nà ju ẹnì tó gùn ún lọ

a straw horse does not know the road better than its rider

ẹnì tó gbéni geşin lóni ká sọ̀pàkọ̀ lùkẹ̀

the person who puts one on the mount gives one the authority to act the role

The horse in other spheres of Yorùbá life

In the apparatus of the state

It is not surprising that *eşin* has an integral place in the apparatus of the state among the Yorùbá. Its stature in the Yorùbá power structure and tradition has ironically been projected throughout the world over the past thirty years by a work of art: the play *Ikú Olókùn Eşin* (Işolá 1994),³⁷ which most people believed

³⁷Translated from Wolé Şoyinka's English original *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975).

earned Wólé Soyinka the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature at the impressive age of fifty-two. Perhaps the cardinal point that one should make is that the decision of one *Olókùn Eṣin*, the ‘King’s Horseman’, not to accompany his king in death, as tradition commands, signals a radical subversion of the system of values that has sustained the Yorùbá culture of governance since the effective organization of the city state in its *Ọ̀yọ́* manifestation among the Yorùbá. Members of the household of the *Ọ̀ba* who enjoy the exercise of unchallenged power and authority cannot live within the city walls while the *Ọ̀ba* is alive and/or must die with the *Ọ̀ba* upon his demise. This applies to the *àrẹ̀mọ*, the first-born son, of the reigning *Ọ̀ba*, and to *Ààrẹ̀ ọ̀nà Kaka-ń-fò*, the Field Marshall of the Imperial *Ọ̀yọ́*. *Olókùn Eṣin* enjoyed unusual benefits of power distinct from ascribed authority.

Again, the relative antiquity of the institution of *Ọ̀ba* in its *Ọ̀yọ́* form, and of the office of the *Olókùn Eṣin* in particular, interests us here. This is also why I would agree with Robin Law (1980) about the historical importance of the festival of *so-sin*, ‘horse-tying’, among the Ewe-Fon of the Benin–Togo littoral. The ritual chieftain, *sogan*, is in charge of the attendant rites. Does the existence and codification of both *so-sin* and *sogan* among the Ewe-Fon have anything to do with the antiquity of the geomancy system *Fá*, which undoubtedly signals the antiquity of the Yorùbá–Ewe-Fon contact? Does there exist a homologous institutional system among the Bààtonu, which would argue, as *eṣin* appears to do, for the remoteness of the appearance and impact of the animal in the Yorùbá world and/or in association with the two peoples? The existence of discourse forms such as *òwe* that reference the apparatus of the state need not detain us further here.

The horse and the divinities

Since the *Ọ̀ba* is *alayé*, *aláṣẹ̀ èkeji òrìṣà*, ‘the terrestrial custodian of *àṣẹ̀* (the life force) and authority, second only to the Prime Mover divinity’, it is not surprising that *eṣin* figures prominently both in the symbols of hierarchy in the comity of the *òrìṣà* in the Yorùbá world view and social organization, and in the discourse that codifies this presence. Thus, the medium or devotee of an *òrìṣà*, in ritual situations and in live ritual processes when the medium is possessed, is referred to as *ẹ̀lẹ̀gùn òrìṣà*, ‘one whom the *òrìṣà* rides’, or as *eṣin òrìṣà*, ‘the horse of *òrìṣà*’.³⁸

This is, of course, possible; but is it plausible to suggest that both the discourse and its terms of reference are adventitious developments, which date from the relatively recent contact with Islam, post-seventh century CE? The fundamental henotheistic conception and configuration of the Yorùbá pantheon is not identifiable with or traceable to any Middle Eastern or Semitic antecedent – *pace* Bólájí Ìdówú. This, then, argues against the suggestion or insinuation that the trope *ẹ̀gùn òdòṣà* owes the physical presence and power that the devotees perceive and experience when the medium is possessed to a Middle Eastern tradition whose godhead is both remote and impermissibly awe-inspiring. If anything, the force of the dictum *òwe leṣin ọ̀rọ̀* derives, to all intents and purposes, from the indigenous antecedents *ẹ̀gùn òrìṣà* and *ẹ̀lẹ̀gùn òrìṣà*.

³⁸The antiquity of this configuration reverberates in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* (1990 [1938]).

At this point, it is best to leave a logical pursuit of this argument to poetic imagination, which favours assigning a remote antiquity beyond any Middle Eastern contact to the Yorùbá consciousness and epistemology.

Oríkì

As Oyèláràn and Adéwoḷé (2007) insist, properly speaking, *oríkì* does not refer to the praise or adulation of anyone or anything. In fact, among the Yorùbá verbal arts, the genre in essence unequivocally but graphically presents whatever idiosyncratic observations, qualities or attributes single out its subject. *Oríkì* has a primordial status among Yorùbá verbal arts. It is, therefore, important that the horse again features literally and figuratively not only in citations of the mighty and the lowly among human beings in society, but also in citations of all remarkable objects of human experience, including elements of thoughts. Consider the following facetious citation of palm wine, that readily accessible indigenous lubricating oil of social gatherings among the Yorùbá – and probably throughout West Africa:

<i>Àlímòtù akèngbè</i>	Damsel (Àlímòtù) in the gourd
<i>Lánìnhúm inú ahá</i>	Excites emotion in calabash dispenser
<i>Áárò ní í fí í wòlú</i>	Sneaks into town early morning
<i>Bó bá di ojò alé, gōngō a náa sọ</i>	Dionysian events at dusk
<i>Ìyáwò oníkòbò-méjì</i>	Enchanting bride priced at two pennies
<i>Ti í lè ológójè òkè lugbò</i>	Causes million-dollar bride to be expelled into the bush
<i>Ohun tésìn mu mu mu mu gbàgbé ìwo</i>	The horse indulged in it and forgot to spot horns
<i>Ohun tadiẹ mu mu mu mu gbàgbé itò</i>	The chicken indulges in it and forgot about pissing
<i>Ohun táwò mu mu ké ráhùn wọ igbó lọ</i>	The guinea fowl drank till it ran into the bush crying caw-caw

The horse in Yorùbá final rites

If the horse is so integral to Yorùbá life on earth – which, after all, is *àjò*, ‘a journey’, and thus makes all humans pilgrims – what is its place in Yorùbá thinking about death and dying? To answer this, we must turn again both to the Yorùbá discourse about death and dying, and to objects that hold a special place in the rites of passage particular to both. The two texts below invite us to pry a little deeper for a definitive answer:

<i>Ká kú ní kekéré</i>	To die in youth, and
<i>Ká fí eṣìn ẹ irèlẹ ẹni</i>	Have a horse for sacrifice of passage
<i>Ó sàń ju</i>	Better by far than
<i>Ká dàgbà dàgbà</i>	To grow old and bent, and
<i>Ká màà ní adìẹ iràńà</i>	Not have even a chicken to sooth one’s final passage
<i>Bẹyìn bá kú, a fí irù delẹ</i>	When the horse dies, it leaves the tail in its stead
<i>Omọ ẹni ní í ẹyìn deni.</i>	One’s children act for one behind one’s back

Amidst the pathos and solemnity of the *funeralia* at the death of dignitaries, mourners and survivors carry full-length horse-tail fly whisks to enhance their ceremonial movements and gestures – the darker the more desirable. In addition to their efficacy in whisking flies off the dead body lying in state, funeral *irùkèrè* symbolize what the departed has left to hold on to. The movement of and with the horse-tail whisk are accompanied with dirges, mainly *oriki* of the departed, funereal dances and performances. Other dances linked to solemn Yorùbá occasions use both the horse-tail whisks and whisks made from the tails of other animals. An example of the latter accompanies the vigorous *àgbon* performance in Ilé-Ifè.

Horse riddles

It is perhaps fitting to conclude this look at the phenomenon of the horse as plausible signifier of the autochthonous status of the Yorùbá in their West African homeland, and, on the basis of historical association, of the Bààtonu, with a section on riddles – *àlò àpamò* in Yorùbá. And, given the function of the riddle in the epistemological consciousness of a people, we should not be surprised that horse riddles, like horse *òwe* and horse metaphors, abound in Yorùbá and also in Bààtonu. Riddles such as the two below – one that alludes to a horse and one that refers directly to a horse – occur rather commonly. For an appreciation of the non-trivial structure, meaning and function of *àlò àpamò*, Yai (1978) is particularly useful.³⁹

<i>Òjò pátá pátá pátá</i>	Pitter patter of the rain
<i>Ó dé orí àpáta</i>	Reaches the surface of the granite outcrop
<i>Ó pààrá</i>	Pitters out, leaving no trace
<i>A so ẹ̀sìn mò ilé</i>	We tie the horse up in the stable
<i>Gògò rẹ̀ ò yọ̀ ní ìta</i>	Its mane splashes all over the rooftop ⁴⁰

If the reader divines the clue to the *àlò àpamò* in the second example, without a peek at the footnote, we will have embraced the challenge and the discipline required to uncover why Borgu is, in the final analysis, the *orita* of the cultures in the sub-region of encounter between the Yorùbá and the Bààtonu, and why Borgu has played that role since times remote enough to make any myth of a Middle Eastern provenance implausible for any of the peoples who have always inhabited our space, our place on this planet – even if the myth of a Middle Eastern or Semitic provenance did not run counter to what recent inquiries into the human genome suggest as the direction of out-migration of the human species from its African locus of emergence.

³⁹See also Akintúndé Akínyemí (2015).

⁴⁰The clue to the first riddle mimics the sound of the hoofs of the horse or of horseshoes, which leave no trace on the granite outcrop in the horse's path. The second has, as a clue, smoke sent through the roof or chimney by a fire from inside the house.

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Abstract

We have no plausible evidence to suggest that the Yorùbá and the Bààtonu are not autochthonous populations of the territories identified as homelands for them south and west of the confluence of the rivers Niger and Benue. This article uses tangible linguistic and cultural data to question hypotheses of migration from the Middle East, with echoes of Semitic heritage. On the one hand, cognate elements that are clearly identifiable argue for an enduring historical relationship between these two peoples; on the other, probative elements that are shared with other peoples and cultures in the sub-region rule out any suggestion of a conspiracy among all of them to migrate from the Middle East to West Africa in some discoverable historical past.

Résumé

Aucune donnée plausible ne permet de suggérer que les Yorùbá et les Bààtonu ne sont pas des populations autochtones des territoires identifiés comme leurs foyers nationaux au sud et à l'ouest de la confluence du fleuve Niger et de la rivière Benue. Cet article utilise des données linguistiques et culturelles tangibles pour mettre en question des hypothèses de migration du Moyen-Orient, avec des échos d'héritage sémitique. D'un côté, des éléments apparentés clairement identifiables plaident en faveur d'une relation historique durable entre ces deux peuples ; de l'autre, des éléments probants partagés avec d'autres peuples et cultures de la sous-région écartent toute suggestion de conspiration pour migrer du Moyen-Orient vers l'Afrique de l'Ouest dans quelque passé historique découvrable.