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# THE PENTECOST

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Cover photo: Saturna Island, BC

Above photo: Saturna Island, BC

Who are the Yorubas and what is their story? The Yorubas are an African people group with a fascinating story. The gospel came to them a long time ago and many have embraced it and are Christian believers. How did this unfold in history? Read on. God bless you.

Shawn Stevens

Its amazing to think what it would have been like to travel to Nigeria a couple hundred years ago, to enter an unknown tribal village, and trust the Lord to grant you wisdom and grace to know how to reach out to these people. Well here is one such story.  
God Bless you.

Ramona Stevens

## **The Yorubas and Early Missionary Work Amongst Them**

For thousands of years, West Africa has been veiled in mystery. As far back as the fifth century B. C., Herodotus spoke of five young men who, beginning in Egypt, journeyed westward across the great desert and came to a land of fruit trees. After plodding through the lush tree land, they came across a mighty river that flowed from west to east.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that they found themselves on the bank of the great Niger River in what, today, is Nigeria. In 1795 A. D., a Mr. Mungo Park from Scotland trekked from Gambia into the interior of West

Africa and, with great difficulty, reached the Niger River on July 21, 1797. He wrote; "I saw with infinite pleasure the great object of my mission, the long sought for majestic Niger, flowing slowly to the eastward."<sup>2</sup> On this journey, Park did not come to an empty land. He was met by tribal people, native to that land. Who were they? They were the Yorubas. Let us now consider the Yoruban people and early missionary work amongst them.

It has been said that the Yoruba are likely the most urban of all Africans.<sup>3</sup> Today, they live in cities, towns and villages, with many

of their farmers choosing to live in cities and commuting to their farms.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Lagos, the largest of Nigeria's cities, is in the Yoruban region of the country.

However, if we were to visit the Yoruba hundreds of years ago, we would find that they were not living in cosmopolitan cities. They lived in highly-organized and tightly-unified villages.

The history of the Yoruba is very obscure. In the nineteenth century, missionaries began writing about them but, before this,

the history

and legends of the Yoruba were passed from one generation to another by word of mouth. However, one early written source is that of Sultan Belo of Sokoto who, in the nineteenth century, wrote a geographical and historical work which discusses the Yoruba. According to him, the Yoruba originated from a Canaanite tribe of Nimrod. They were allegedly driven out of Arabia and journeyed to an area between Egypt and Abyssinia and, from there, spread into the interior of Africa. Some early Yoruban sculpture resembles Egyptian sculpture, possibly confirming Belo's account.<sup>5</sup>

Once settled, Yoruban tribes-people organized themselves into smaller groupings, some being the Egba, the Ijesha, the Awori, the Ondos, the Ijebus and the Egbados. In Yorubaland, the region of Oyo became most dominant and its people became the leaders of the Yoruba. However, in the 1820s, the influence of Oyo was greatly weakened as Yorubaland was destabilized by tribal warfare.<sup>6</sup> After these years, the Yoruba would never gain back the previous degree of native unity which they had experienced under Oyo rule. The only central government that would come to exert control over the entire region was the colonial British government, established in Lagos in 1861, and later the independent Nigerian government, in 1960. S. G. Pinnock, who first came to Africa in 1888, tells us much about early Yoruban culture. The tribes were governed by a hierarchy of chiefs, secondary chiefs and elders. Tribal families held property for which they did not pay rent or taxes. Pinnock says that the first thing that a stranger to the Yoruba notices is their many different forms of

salutations. Sitting, feasting, working, mourning, riding and walking all require particular ways of greeting.<sup>7</sup> Although the Yoruba did not have a written language, missionaries found that Yorubas did communicate with symbols. Tangible objects like shells, stones, coal, feathers, corn, sticks, pepper and powder were used to convey ideas, wishes and feelings.

For example, a single shell displayed or given away may communicate failure and defiance. If a Yoruban wished to affirm relationships between himself and a brother or sister, he may deliver to them two shells strung together, face to face. Similarly, two shells strung, back to back, represented enmity and separation. If the Yoruban wished to have an immediate and friendly meeting with someone, he would tie a small feather between two facing shells.<sup>8</sup>

Yoruban children would commonly undergo face markings. This involved a series of parallel cuts being made on their cheeks, followed by the removal of narrow strips of skin between the incisions, and the application of medicine. Once the scars healed, there was a permanent marking on the face. As many as ten to forty marks could be made on one child. The Yorubas were very religious and frequently could be heard calling out the name of their god and the names of their idols.<sup>9</sup>

Pinnock says that the Yorubas were obsessed with religion.<sup>10</sup> He says, further, that it is easier to number the objects of their worship rather than the theology of their beliefs. He says that they had 401 idols, some of them constituting

deified human beings, some gods over the natural elements, some being domestic, agricultural or craft gods, others being animals, others being objects in nature and, lastly, some being malignant spirits. Separate from this, they also believed in one supreme god, who was the creator, the giver of life and the judge of all men.<sup>11</sup>

Within Yoruban society you could find not only culture and religion, but also kind-hearted, faithful and self-sacrificing individuals. Pinnock tells how, one day, he came across a young man calling for help. The man was dressed in rags and it was apparent that he had leprosy. He was attended to by Pinnock and others with him, cleaned up and given fresh clothes, some money and medicinal ointment. He returned to the missionaries once a week for on-going assistance. Then, for a week or two, he did not show up and, upon inquiry, Pinnock discovered that the man was too ill to leave his home. Pinnock visited the home to find it part of a large compound which had been vacated by the man's relatives. Most of the compound was in ruins and the only pleasant sight was a palm tree in the man's room. All of a sudden, Pinnock realized that there was someone else standing at the entrance to the man's room. Upon inquiry, he learned that it was the man's mother. She would not leave her son. She swept his room and brought him food, water and firewood. She thanked Pinnock for whatever assistance he offered the man, and Pinnock felt that she deserved thanks for being "the ministering angel in human form."<sup>12</sup>

Early Christian missionaries began reaching out to the Yoruba, such as this woman and her son. In the early nineteenth century, revival was sweeping

England and, as a result, large numbers of Christians became awakened to the Great Commission and to the great needs of the African mission field. They sold belongings, boarded ships, landed on the shores of the African continent and began trekking their way inland.

Why did they come? They held the conviction that God wished to bring salvation to people from all nations. Their prayer was much like that of King David who prayed; "GOD BE merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause His face to shine upon us; Selah. That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations." (Psalm 67.1-2KJV). They read in the Scriptures of how the LORD had promised to Abraham that "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice." (Genesis 22.18KJV).

The phrase, "in thy seed" was a reference to Jesus Christ and that, through Him, blessing would come to "all the nations of the earth". Did their decision to go mean personal sacrifices? Yes, it did. They left the comforts and familiarity of the lands of their birth. Although they left these things, they held onto what really mattered, their faith and their integrity and, specifically, their integrity in fulfilling Christ's Commission; "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." (Matthew 28.19-20 ).

These white-skinned, missionary, inland visitors looked peculiar to the Yoruba and the Yoruba named them the "Oyinbo,"

which means a man who has peeled skin. 13 They believed that all people were once black, but some had found a way of peeling the black off of their skin. 14

These early Oyinbo missionaries, living on Nigeria's coast, translated the Bible into the Yoruban language<sup>1</sup> and began seeing spiritual fruit. In the early 1900s, two young Yoruban slave boys escaped from their

tribe and made their way to Lagos. Here, they met a missionary who showed them much love and who taught them to read the Bible. They both committed their lives to Christ and were baptized. In the following years, the British government banned slavery and one of the two boys, Peter, built up the courage to go back to the tribe in which he formerly was a slave. He did so, and began to tell his people about the Lord Jesus. He was ridiculed, persecuted, beaten and almost poisoned. Some, however, were impressed with the joy and love that Peter demonstrated and asked him more about his faith. Peter, together with some of them, began praying that God would send a missionary to their tribe. 15

In 1908, their prayer was answered with the arrival of a young Canadian missionary, Mr. Tommy Titcombe. When Titcombe first applied to a mission organization, his application was rejected. His education

was not complete, him having left school early to support his single mother.

However, in time he was accepted and after a two-year training program, he left for the West African mission field. He followed the Niger River inland and came across another missionary, Dr. Andrew Park Stirett. Together, the two journeyed through the broiling heat, by

day, and slept in the open among lions, leopards and snakes, by night. They journeyed onward until they reached Peter's tribe. There they found Peter and a small group of others praying and reading a Yoruban Bible. 16

This encounter with Peter and the others marked the beginning of Titcombe's work among the Yoruba. Stirett remained with him for a time and then continued northward. Titcombe's hut-home was shared with

dogs, goats, sheep and chickens, not to mention, lizards and snakes. He made the best of his surroundings and began to learn the Yoruban language. Initially, the tribe was slow to trust him. He endured times of hunger, sickness, persecution and loneliness. However, in time, he bonded with the people and shared in their joys and also in their sorrows. 17

Titcombe had sorrows of his own, as it seemed that his progress was so slow. He did not reside only in Peter's village, but traveled to neighbouring villages as well. He was the first to visit the large village of Mopa. There, he was refused lodging and from the little that he had learned of the Yoruban language, he thought he heard the tribes-people planning to harm him. Lying under the stars that night, he suddenly heard the sound of bare feet approaching. His first thought was that villagers had come to kill him. Instead, he heard the hushed voice of a man calling "Oyinbo! Oyinbo!" It was a young Mopa villager who had come to ask Titcombe about

Titcombe's faith. Before the night was over, the young man had committed his life to Christ. This man was the first of a number from Mopa to accept the Lord and, after a year-and-a-half, they were baptized and a small church was formed.

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The newly-formed Mopa church experienced terrible persecution. Some members were beaten, some were imprisoned, and others were threatened with death. Some were mysteriously removed. Some were held in stocks, positioned in the hot sun near an open market place. However, despite these hardships, they endured and very soon something wonderful was about to happen. 19

The faithfulness of the Mopa believers, while undergoing such hardships, was an inspiring testimony and witness to the other villagers. Soon, others began committing their lives to Christ, as well. This culminated in an awakening which saw thousands of tribesmen come to Christ. 20

Having experienced much victory in Mopa, Titcombe continued on to the Yoruban town of Kponyan. He had three boys journeying with him and, upon arriving at the entrance to the town, the boys would not go any farther. This was because continuing on meant stepping under human skulls, which had been hung at that spot. Because they refused to come, Titcombe told them that it would be all right for them to wait for him until he returned. Proceeding into the town, he came across a woman carrying a pot of water. The thirsty Titcombe requested, and received from her, a drink. 21 He realized afterwards he had done a foolish thing by speaking to a woman before first greeting the tribal king. When he did meet the king later, the king was furious at him. 22

Caught in a tense situation, Titcombe began to pray. Next, another woman stepped into the scene with a gift of food

for the king. He began eating it and seemed to forget about Titcombe. Titcombe carefully began asking the king some questions, whether or not he was a chief?

He responded that he was for the whole territory. Titcombe then remarked, that the king was treating him in a way that he wouldn't treat his lowest subject. Now the king asked him what mean? Titcombe explained, that he was a stranger and the king had not offered him anything to eat. The king then invited him to eat and Titcombe reached into the king's calabash. Next, the king jumped up and cried out that the white man was now his friend for life because he had eaten from his own calabash!<sup>23</sup>

Titcombe did prove to be a great friend to the king and to the others at Kponyan. The boys were brought into the town and, together with Titcombe, they began singing loudly. Before long, the entire village was gathered before them and Titcombe preached the gospel. The following day, he and the boys visited every hut in the town and held another service. This was followed by another service on their third night there. Then Titcombe announced to the king that he would be leaving the next morning. The king responded that he didn't want Titcombe to leave and instead he wanted to hear more.<sup>24</sup> Titcombe continued ministering to them the next evening and assured the king that he would be coming back. It would be two years before he did make it back to Kponyan. <sup>25</sup>

The Lord continued to use Titcombe

amongst the Yoruban tribes-people. One very disturbing practice which had been an age-old tradition among the Yoruba, but not exclusive to them, was their treatment of twins and the mothers of twins. It had been their long-standing belief that when a woman gave birth to twins she was cursed, along with the children. The mother would be driven away and the twins would be killed. During his second term of missionary service, Titcombe married and, in time, Mrs. Titcombe, herself, gave birth to twins. After years of working among the Yoruba, Titcombe had gained the trust and respect of thousands of tribes-people. He was open about the fact that his wife had twins.<sup>26</sup> At first this shocked the Yoruba but, in time, they began to see that the Titcombe family was blessed and not cursed.

As the work among the Yoruba was growing, a need arose for work among Yoruban women and girls. Miss Lillian McIntosh, the sister of Mrs. Titcombe, began a school for women in the Egbe tribe. The work was expanded in 1928 with the arrival of Miss Pauline Guyer, who started a school for girls. She was joined a year later by Josephine Bulifant.

The Yoruba were very slow in allowing their girls to attend the school. Some old men in the Oro district said that the girls were incapable of book learning.<sup>27</sup> The women persevered and, by the end of 1930, had twelve girls boarding with them.

Girls would come to board with the missionary women under many different circumstances. One day, a group of



children could be heard shouting; "Oyinbo De! Oyinbo De!"<sup>29</sup> Which means the white people have come. One girl expressed that she was not afraid and ran to a spot where she could get a closer look. There she saw the curious white people with stiff hats, funny shoes, stockings and glasses in front of their eyes. The girl was named Folorunso. After gazing on them for a time, Folorunso, along with other children, went to the home of a teacher in the village. Ben, the teacher, told the children stories about the curious white people who had journeyed across the great ocean, leaving family and friends to come to live with the Yoruba. Folorunso heard Ben say that the white people had some very good news for them which, if believed, would bring them peace and joy. Later, one of the missionary women talked to Folorunso in the Yoruban language. Her speech was hard to follow, but Folorunso did pick up that a school for girls was being started in Oro.<sup>29</sup> She began to dream of what the school must be like. <sup>30</sup> When she asked to go, she was told that she was too young. She secretly followed the white people anyway, all the way to Oro. When she was discovered missing, her kinsmen came and found her. She expressed that this was her new home. <sup>31</sup> Arrangements were made, and she was allowed to stay. At her new home, she daily heard new stories about Jesus and was taught to pray. One day she said to one of the missionaries how she loved Jesus.<sup>32</sup> When asked what her favourite Bible verse was, she quoted John 3.16; "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."KJV

One beautiful example of a Yoruban believing in Jesus and experiencing His deliverance is that of Alege. Alege was a sixteen-year old Yoruban. Her father had promised her in marriage to one of his friends. She loathed the idea of being one of this man's many wives and she begged her father to set her free. Alege had accepted the gospel, having heard it from her brother who had spent time with the missionaries. From him, she also learned of the mission school for girls. Before she could make her decision to flee, she was seized by men from the village and put inside a hut belonging to the man to whom she was engaged. Stones were piled up against the entrance-way to the hut and some men stood watch over it as well. Alege began praying to the Lord for help. As the night wore on, the guards fell asleep and Alege was able to get past the stones. She had escaped, but getting to The mission station meant traveling for miles in the darkness through tall grass inhabited by lions, leopards and snakes. She determined to go and started running. Arriving before dawn, she was received by the missionaries. Her would-be in-laws were very upset and came to the mission station to reclaim her. Before all of them, she bravely confessed Jesus Christ as her Savior and declared her desire to stay at the school. The missionaries stood by her and began praying. A Mrs. Moulding began giving the would-be in-laws peppermint candy, which they had never tasted before. They calmed down enough for negotiations to begin between the missionaries and themselves. In the end, Alege was allowed to stay in exchange for some money.<sup>33</sup> Josephine claims that she became an outstanding Christian.<sup>34</sup>



Josephine and the other women continued their work with the Yoruban woman and children. Their experiences continued to be full of sorrows and joys.

For Josephine, and the other missionaries, work among the Yoruba was always a mixture of grief and joy, sorrow and happiness, gloom and cheer, loss and victory. They persevered, and with the Lord's strength, faced many unexpected turns.

The history of the Yoruba stretches far back. Those ancient journeyers who crossed the desert became ancient settlers. They multiplied into tribes which were highly organized, ruled by chiefs and elders. All who saw their face-markings knew that they were the Yoruba. They communicated with each other in a variety of ways and exchanged friendly salutations. Within their tribes were those, like the leper, whose lives were brightened by the faithfulness of devoted mothers and, also, those whose lives were darkened by superstitious traditions such as the abandonment of twin children. To these people, the missionaries came. They made personal sacrifices; they endured hardships; many times they were misunderstood. They laboured anyway, translating the Bible, and sharing the message and the love of Jesus Christ with the Yoruba. With melted hearts, they continued on, that all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The blessing of salvation through Jesus Christ was embraced by many Yoruba. These new believers endured being misunderstood and, in some cases, fierce persecution. The witness of their testimony shone brightly to all who would

observe it in their day, and to all who read of it now. The faith of Yoruban Christians has not ended, but has been reproduced in the lives of those who make up the Yoruban church today.

**Shawn Stevens**

## **ENDNOTES**

1As early as 1844, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel had been translated into the Yoruban language. Gollmer, Charles Andrew Gollmer, *His Life And Missionary Labours In West Africa*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton), 13.

2A calabash is a vessel made of a dried gourd shell or the shell of a calabash tree, used for holding foods, liquids or goods.

1Josephine C. Bulifant, *40 Years In The African Bush* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, ), 13.

2Ibid., 13.

3John B. Grimley and Gordon E. Robinson, *Church Growth In Central And Southern Nigeria* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 256.

4Bobbie Kalman, *Nigeria : The People* (New York: Crabtree Publishing Co., 2001), 13.

5Josephine C. Bulifant, *40 Years In The African Bush* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, ), 17-18.

6John Peel, *Religious Encounter And The Making Of The Yoruba* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000), 27-28.

7S. G. Pinnock, *The Romance Of Missions In Nigeria* (Richmond: Southern Baptist Convention, 1918), 85-86.

8Gollmer, Charles Andrew Gollmer, *His Life And Missionary Labours In West Africa*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton), 199-200.

9S. G. Pinnock, *The Romance Of Missions In Nigeria* (Richmond: Southern Baptist Convention, 1918), 88.

10Ibid., 88.

11Ibid., 89.

12Ibid., 56-57.

13Josephine C. Bulifant, *40 Years In The African Bush* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, ), 16. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

14Ibid., 16.

15Ibid., 22-23.

16Ibid., 24-26.

17Ibid., 26-27.

18Ibid., 28-29. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

19Ibid., 29.

20Ibid., 29.

21Ibid., 30.

22Ibid., 30-31. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

23Ibid., 32. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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24Ibid., 32. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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25Ibid., 33. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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26Ibid., 34-36.

27Ibid., 45-48. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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28Ibid., 47. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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29Ibid., 52-53. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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30Ibid., 53. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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31Ibid., 54. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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32Ibid., 55. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.

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33Ibid., 60-62.

34Ibid., 62. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.  
[www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

35Ibid., 168. Taken from *40 Years In The African Bush* by Josephine Bulifant. Copyright © 1980 by Zondervan. Use by permission of Zondervan.  
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36Ibid., 167.

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Scripture taken from the King James Bible.

