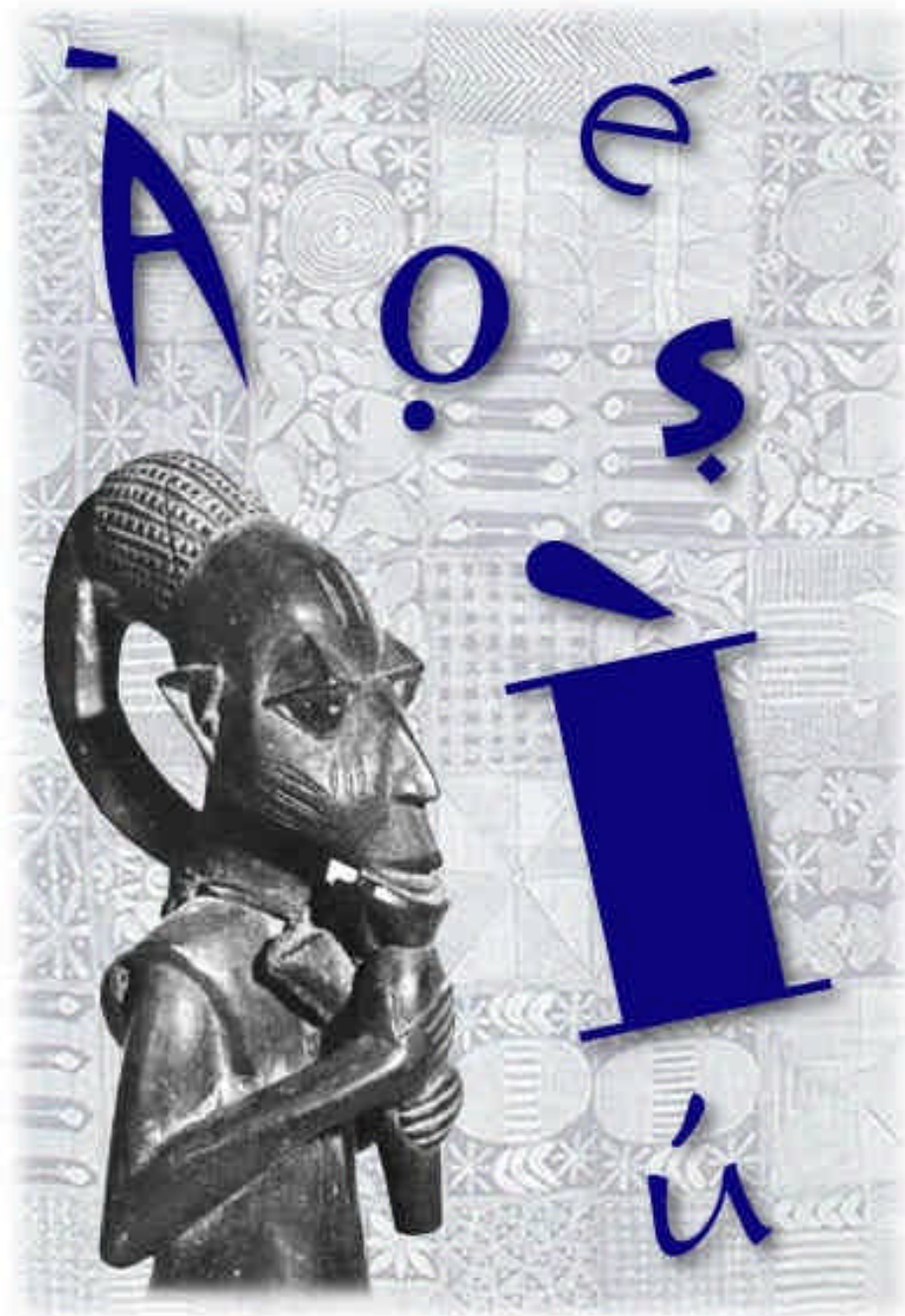


Kékeré Yorùbá Study Module



A Basic Introduction to the Yorùbá Language

Introduction

The following study module is called Kékeré Yorùbá, which means “Little Yorùbá” in English. It is a very brief introduction presenting only the very basic elements of the Yorùbá language including basic pronunciation and vocabulary. Ifá was born from Yorùbá culture and many of the praise songs, prayers and invocations that we use each day are written in Yorùbá.

Further, for the student serious about learning Yorùbá the challenge also presents an opportunity to learn more about not just the culture, but also the religion and deeper philosophical ideas supporting Ifá itself. Yorùbá is a language rich with meaning that can be interpreted at various levels. What is presented here is just the first of many steps in learning this beautiful and powerful language. ♦

Understanding the Yorùbá Alphabet

The Yorùbá Alphabet				
a	b	d	e	<u>e</u>
f	g	gb	h	i
j	k	l	m	n
o	<u>o</u>	p	r	s
<u>s</u>	t	u	w	y

The Yorùbá alphabet contains 25 letters, with each letter representing its own unique sound. As you can see from the above table, the Yorùbá alphabet uses characters not found in the English alphabet. These characters also have unique pronunciations that will be addressed in subsequent sections.

Learning the Yorùbá alphabet is important for students of Òrìṣà because in addition to being the first step in learning the language it also allows the traditional Ifá devotee to determine when a word has been changed through interaction with another Òrìṣà based language, such as Lukumi. The presence of letters not native to the Yorùbá alphabet, such as the letter “c” (very common in many Lukumi words), would indicate a word that has since been changed from the original Yoruba.

In fact, the Yorùbá language has a way to indicate words borrowed from another language through the use of tonal marks. However, this falls into a more advanced level of study and is being presented for the purpose of general information only at this time. ♦

Pronouncing the Yorùbá Letters

Learning to properly pronounce the Yorùbá letters is an essential step in learning to make even the most basic use of the language. As you will learn in a later section, the pronunciation coupled with the pitch is what delineates one word from another in Yorùbá.

A Guide to Yorùbá Pronunciation		
Letter	Sound	Example
a	“ah”	father
e	“ay”	bait
<u>e</u>	“eh”	let
i	“ee”	bee
o	“oh”	boat
<u>o</u>	“aw”	got
u	“oo”	moon
s	“s”	say
<u>s</u>	“sh”	shop
p	“kp”	Like running the words “back pay” together at the same time
gb	“p” or “b” sound	Like saying the words “big boy” together very quickly
Note: Both the “a” and the “ <u>o</u> ” sound similar. The difference is with the shape of the mouth and the way that modulates the sound. This can be one of the trickiest distinctions to make for a non-Yorùbá person to make when hearing the language being spoken.		

The student is advised to spend time practicing the proper pronunciation of the Yorùbá characters using the phrases and vocabulary words presented later in this module. ♦

Proper Pronunciation for the Òrìṣà Names

The following chart provides the proper pronunciation for the names of the Orisa, many of which are mispronounced in the Diaspora. Please see the subsequent section on tone/pitch in order to insure that both pronunciation and pitch come together to create overall proper pronunciation. ♦

Proper Pronunciation of Òrìṣà Names	
Olódùmarè	Oh-loh-doo-mah-ray
Èṣù	Ay-shoo
Òṣun	Aw-shoon
Ṣàngó	Shahn-go
Oya	Aw-yah
Ògún	Oh-goon
Òsòòsì	Aw-shaw-see
Obàtálá	Aw-bah-tah-lah
Yemoja	Yay-maw-jah (hard “j”)
Òrúnmìlà	Aw-roon-mee-lah
Ìbejì	Ee-bay-jee (hard “j”)
Olókun	Oh-loh-koon
Orí	Oh-ree
Egúngún	Ay-goon-goon

Tonal Marks – The Key to Yorùbá Language

Yorùbá is a tonal language, which means that the meaning of words depends on the pitch of one's voice when speaking them. There may be several Yorùbá words consisting of the same sequence of letters, but variations in the tonal marks distinguish one word from another.

It is essential that one learn how to properly change the pitch of one's voice when speaking Yorùbá, especially to a native speaker. The differences in words can be quite dramatic and maintaining the proper tone is the only way to avoid a miscommunication.

This is what most non-Yorùbá students seem to find the most challenging. However, with a bit of practice it becomes much easier than it sounds on paper. While it does take some time to understand and put into practice the changes in pitch, once mastered it allows one to perceive the full beauty of the Yorùbá language. If one hears a native Yorùbá speaking their language it often sounds as if they are singing, even when they are engaged in normal conversation. It is one of the most lyrical and enchanting languages of the world!

The Yorùbá represent shifts in tone through using a high and low tonal mark. Using the letter “a” as an example, the marks are represented below.

The Yorùbá Tonal Marks	
á	High tone, indicating higher pitch
a	Middle tone, indicating regular pitch
à	Low tone, indicating lower pitch

The tonal marks may be likened to **DO**, **RE** and **MI** on the musical scale. DO represents the low tonal mark. RE represents the middle tone (with no mark). MI represents the high tonal mark. When using this tool one can easily see how speaking Yorùbá can be very much like singing a song.

If we examine the following word – **Baba** – we can see that there are no tonal markings, which would indicate that this word would be pronounced with an even mid-tonality.

Examining the word – **Dúdú** – we can see that both vowels have a high tonal marking indicating the need to say the entire word at a higher pitch.

Lastly, an examination of the word – **Ìyá** – illustrates the use of both a low and high tone in the same word. This means that the word would start off with a lower pitch and end on a higher one.

Many Yorùbá words have varied tonality within the same word. For example, **àlàáfíà** displays a variety of tones, starting with a low tone moving into another low tone,

followed by two high tones and ending once again on a low tone. The best way to get a feel for this somewhat complex pronunciation is by saying the word slowly, carefully emphasizing both proper pronunciation *and* pitch.

To understand just how important proper pitch is when speaking Yorùbá, we present the following three words with their tonal marks and meaning. Note the significant differences between all three words. It is easy to see how neglecting to use proper pitch along with proper pronunciation could easily lead to miscommunications in verbal dialogs and mistranslated words in written communications.

Three Yorùbá Words	
bé	High tone, meaning “jump, leap”
bẹ	Middle tone, meaning “cut, peel”
bẹ̀	Low tone, meaning “beg”

It often helps to work with a partner when learning Yorùbá as it makes it easier to hear what is being said rather than trying to both speak and listen at the same time. This is one area where only practice and dedication enable the student to develop the skill required to recognize and emulate proper pitch when speaking the Yorùbá language. ♦

Yorùbá Numbers

The Yorùbá language handles counting, cardinal and ordinal numbers differently. For the purposes of this study module, only the counting and cardinal numbers 1 through 10 will be presented. This will be expanded in future study modules. ♦

Learning Yorùbá Numbers		
#	Counting Example: One, two...	Cardinal Example: One egg, two eggs...
1	oókan	kan
2	eéjì	méjì
3	eéta	méta
4	eérin	mérin
5	aárùnún	márùnún
6	<u>e</u> éfà	m <u>e</u> fà
7	<u>e</u> éje	m <u>e</u> je
8	<u>e</u> éjo	m <u>e</u> jo
9	<u>e</u> ésànan	m <u>e</u> sànan
10	<u>e</u> éwàá	m <u>e</u> wàá

Yorùbá Colors

A thorough discussion on the Yorùbá color scheme requires a very detailed study of not just chromatics, but also philosophy, religion and culture as well. It is well beyond the intention of this module to fully explain the basis of the traditional Yorùbá color scheme, however, the Yorùbá words for the most basic colors are presented below.

It should be noted that the traditional Yorùbá color scheme involves only three colors – black, red and white. Rather than viewing them as finite colors the Yorùbá viewed these as spectrums on a single continuum that, while distinct, would blend into one another. Within these three basic “colors” all colors could be classified. For example, a dark blue would be classified in the “black” category, while orange may be classified in the “red” category.

The Yorùbá have since developed names for individual colors, both by borrowing words from other cultures and using comparison to describe the quality of the color itself. Some examples may be found below. ♦

Learning Yorùbá Colors	
Color	Yorùbá Word
Black	Dúdú
Red	Pupa
White	Funfun
Blue	Búlù (borrowed from English)
Yellow	Yélò (borrowed from English)
Grey	Ó rí bí eérú (comparison to ash)
Green	Dúdú bí ewé (“Black like leaves”)
Note: Sometimes the word “aró” is used for blue, but this actually refers to a blue dye and not the color itself.	

Common Yorùbá Words, Phrases and Expressions

The syntax of the Yorùbá can be quite complex to a non-Yorùbá person seeking to learn the language. Any serious student is advised to acquire a complete teaching aid on the subject and practice through both written and verbal communication.

More commonly used words, phrases and expressions can be found below. Some words that directly relate to the practice of Ifá have been included to familiarize the student with some basic terminology used daily by Ifá devotees. ♦

Common Yorùbá Greetings
<u>E</u> káàrò – Good Morning (to an elder or someone older than you) Káàrò – Good Morning (to a peer or someone younger than you) <i>This greeting is used from the early morning hours until about noon.</i>
<u>E</u> káàsán – Good Afternoon (to an elder or someone older than you) Káàsán – Good Afternoon (to a peer or someone younger than you) <i>This greeting is used from noon until about 4 p.m.</i>
<u>E</u> kùùròlẹ̀ – Good Evening (to an elder or someone older than you) Kùùròlẹ̀ – Good Evening (to a peer or someone younger than you) <i>This greeting is used from about 4 p.m. until about 7 p.m.</i>
<u>E</u> káalẹ̀ – Good Late Evening (to an elder or someone older than you) Káalẹ̀ – Good Late Evening (to a peer or someone younger than you) <i>This greeting is used from about 7 p.m. until the early morning hours.</i>
Important Note: The honorific pronoun “<u>E</u>” is <i>always</i> used when greeting either one’s elder or someone older than oneself. The Yorùbá culture is based on honoring one’s elders and this respect is integrated directly into the language itself. It is not appropriate to use “<u>E</u>” when speaking to one’s peers or someone younger than oneself, but to neglect to use it with one’s elders is considered a sign of disrespect and the mark of a rude individual. There are also lessons relating directly to Ifá in this note. It is also standard in Yorùbá culture for the younger person to initiate the greeting with the older person and to do so in a respectful way, using the appropriate greeting. There are even physical gestures specific to gender that are used when greeting an elder. When greeted using the proper greeting above, one’s elders will return the greeting appropriate for someone younger than they are. Age may refer to either physical age and/or initiatory age within the Ifá religion. For example, you greet your elder by saying “<u>E</u> káàrò.” Your elder would return the greeting by saying simply “Káàrò.”

Greeting: Báwo ni? – How are things? Response: Dáadáa ni. – Fine. <i>This greeting is used among peers and is not appropriate for one's elders. One's elders may offer this greeting to you, but you should wait until they initiate it. They should be greeted using the proper greeting (with the honorific pronoun "<u>E</u>") listed above.</i>
Greeting: Sé àlàáfíà ni? – How are you? Response: Àlàáfíà ni. – Fine/Doing well. <i>This greeting is used among peers and is not appropriate for one's elders. One's elders may offer this greeting to you, but you should wait until they initiate it. They should be greeted using the proper greeting (with the honorific pronoun "<u>E</u>") listed above.</i>

Common Yorùbá Expressions
Bèè ni – Yes Bèè kó/Ó tì – No
<u>E</u> sé – Thank you (to an elder or someone older than you) O sé – Thank you (to a peer or someone younger than you)
Mo dúpé – I thank you. A dúpé – We thank you. Mo dúpé púpò – I thank you very much. A dúpé púpò – We thank you very much.
Kò tópe– You're welcome/Don't mention it/It's nothing
Àlàáfíà – Greeting that means "Well being," a way of greeting someone wishing them well at the same time. <i>This is best used between peers or with people younger than you. It is not considered an acceptable greeting for an elder. In some cases this may be the greeting used to greet and show respect to an Òrìsà priest, but when used in this way it is accompanied by a specific ritual gesture to distinguish it from a social greeting used by peers.</i>
Ó dàbò – Goodbye. <i>This closing is used universally between peers and elders alike.</i>
<u>E</u> má bínú – I'm sorry (to an elder or someone older than you) Má bínú – I'm sorry (to a peer or someone younger than you)
<u>E</u> kò tópe– You're welcome/Don't mention it/It's nothing (to an elder or someone older than you) Kò tópe– You're welcome/Don't mention it/It's nothing (to a peer or someone younger than you)

Kí ni orúkọ re? – What is your name?

Orúkọ mi ni... – My name is...

It is generally considered improper for someone to ask someone's name in Yorùbá culture. The idea of coming up to someone, greeting them and asking for their name is a foreign concept in Yorùbá culture. The exception is when an elder or someone older than you asks for your name, which is considered acceptable.

E dide! – Stand up (to an elder or someone older than you)

E jókòó– Sit down (to an elder or someone older than you)

Dide! – Stand up (to a peer or someone younger than you)

Jókòó– Sit down (to a peer or someone younger than you)

E má dide! – Don't stand up (to an elder or someone older than you)

E má jókòó– Don't sit down (to an elder or someone older than you)

Má dide! – Don't stand up (to a peer or someone younger than you)

Má jókòó– Don't sit down (to a peer or someone younger than you)

Mo fẹràn re – I love you (to one individual, singular)

Mo fẹràn yin – I love you (to more than one person, plural)

Mo naa fẹràn re – I love you too (to one individual, singular)

Mo naa fẹràn yin – I love you too (to more than one person, plural)

A Brief Yorùbá Vocabulary

The following section lists some commonly used Yorùbá words, many of which relate directly to the Òrìṣà or to the practice of Ifá. ♦

Common and Òrìṣà Related Yorùbá Vocabulary	
Abo	Female (indicating gender, not speaking of a woman per se)
Abòrìṣà	An Orisa worshipper, most often used in the Diaspora to mean someone who has received some basic initiations. This makes a distinction between someone initiated as a priest of Òrìṣà.
Àbòrú Àboyè Àbòṣìṣe	May the sacrifice/prayers be sanctioned/heard May the sacrifice/prayers be accepted May the sacrifice/prayers manifest “Àbòrú, Àboyè” is considered one of the proper greetings for a Babalawo or Ìyánifá (Ifá initiate). The priest will return the greeting of “Àbòṣìṣe.” In many cases an extended blessing will be offered by the initiate when returning this greeting. This varies from priest to priest.
Àdímú	Food offerings made to the Ancestors and/or Òrìṣà.
Àdúrà	Prayer
Akò	Male (indicating gender, not speaking of a man per se)
Àlàáfíà	Greeting that means “Well being”; a way of greeting someone and wishing them well at the same time. <i>See important note under the section on greetings.</i>
Àṣe	Life force; a common meaning; “May it manifest” or “It is so.”
Awo	Mystery; a name for all Òrìṣà devotees; a name for an individual Òrìṣà priest; a term used to identify the Ifá religion.
Àyèwò	Investigation, often used in place of “Ibì” in divination to indicate the need to investigate issues further.
Baba/Baba mi	Father/My father
Babalórìṣà	A male priest of Òrìṣà, often with spiritual children of his own.
Ebo	Sacrifice or offering This may be used to indicate the offering of blood to the Òrìṣà.

	though in the Diaspora this is often used as a general term indicating an offering made to the Ancestors and/or Òrìṣà.
Éérìndínlógún	The name for the sacred Oracle of Òrìṣà initiates. While it refers to the sixteen cowries used during divination, it literally translates to “twenty minus four,” which illustrates the way the Yorùbá calculate certain numbers.
Èèwò	Taboo
Egbé	Society or group of people; i.e., Egbé Òsun is a group of Òsun initiates.
Èjè	Blood
Emu òpẹ	Palm wine
Epo pupa	Red palm oil
Ewé	Leaf or leaves
Ibi	Bad luck; bad fortune
Ìborí	The ritual serving, praising and feeding of one’s Orí.
Idè	Anklet, bracelet or necklace; used to refer to the sacred beaded items of the Òrìṣà, although most often used in the Diaspora to indicate a bracelet of some type.
Igbá	Literally means “calabash,” but is often used to indicate a container filled with the sacred mysteries and consecrated implements of the Òrìṣà; i.e., Igbá Òsun is Osun’s sacred ritual container.
Ikin Ifá	Sacred palm nuts used in the most important divination rituals.
Ilé	House; used to describe an Orisa family
Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀	Literally means “bead,” but is often used to refer to the sacred beaded necklaces of the Òrìṣà.
Ire	Good fortune; good luck
Ìyá/Ìyá mi	Mother/My mother
Ìyálórìṣà	A female priest of Òrìṣà, often with spiritual children of her own.
Obì àbàtà	Kola nut

Obìnrin	Female or specifically a woman
Odù Ifá	The 256 signs used in Ifá divination, which represent the fundamental forces of creation in the universe; also used as a reference to the Ifá literary corpus.
Ògbèrì	Someone that has received no type of initiation into the mysteries of Òrìṣà; a novice. Often the Lukumi use the word “aleyo” to indicate a non-initiate. This word is actually a permutation on the Yorùbá word “àlejò” that means “stranger” or “visitor.” Ògbèrì is the traditional word used to indicate someone that has no initiations.
Okùnrin	Male or specifically a man
Olórìṣà	A male or female Òrìṣà initiate. Sometimes this word is used to indicate someone that has been initiated into the mysteries of the Òrìṣà but have no spiritual children through rites of initiation.
Olúwo	One’s “godfather” in Ifá. This term is applied differently within traditional Ifá than in Lukumi. In Ifá this term can apply to either an Òrìṣà priest <i>or</i> Babalawo. The general meaning of the word indicates a person teaching you about the religion. It may, in some cases, indicate a certain rank within the Ifá priesthood.
Omi tútù	Cool water
Omièrò	Consecrated herbal water; “calming water”
Omo	Child; offspring This can be used to refer to one’s biological and spiritual children.
Òpèlè	Ifá divination chain
Òrí	Shea butter
Oríkì	Praise name or history; sometimes used as an invocation to call the subject of the Oríkì
Orin	Song
Orógbó	Bitter kola nut

<u>Ose</u> Dúdú/ <u>Ose</u> Aládìn	Black soap
<u>O</u>tí	A general word used for liquor or wine.
Owó	Money
Oyin	Honey

Yorùbá Language Resources

The followings books and online resources have been presented to give the student additional resources for learning to speak Yorùbá. Many of these books are out of print and can be difficult to locate, however a dedicated out-of-print search should yield some results for the determined seeker. ♦

Abraham M.A. D.Litt, R.C., Dictionary of Modern Yoruba, University of London Press Ltd, London, 1958

Adéwálé-Somadhi, FAMA Àìná, FAMA's Èdè Awo (Òrìṣà Yorùbá Dictionary), Ilé Òrúnmìlà Communications, San Bernadino, 1996

Barber, Karin, Yorùbá Dùn Ún Sọ: Book One A beginners' Course in Yoruba, New Horn Press, Ibadan, 1984 (Comes with a two tape set)

Schleicher, Antonia Yétúndé Fólàrìn, Jé K'Á Sọ Yorùbá, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993

Yai, Olabiyi Babalola, Yoruba-English English-Yoruba Concise Dictionary, Hippocrene Books, New York, 1996

Dictionary of the Yoruba Language: English-Yoruba Yoruba-English, Church Missionary Society Bookshop, Lagos, 1937

www.motherlandnigeria.com - An excellent website on Yorùbá culture, including a section on the Yorùbá language.

www.learnyoruba.com - A small, but potentially useful resource for learning the Yorùbá language.