Society of Young Nigerian Writer

Yoruba Fact-Finder

Compilations of Yoruba History, culture and tradition

Compiled by: Wole Adedoyin
The Yorùbá religion comprises the indigenous religion of the Yoruba people. Its homeland is in Southwestern Nigeria and the adjoining parts of Benin and Togo, a region that has come to be known as Yorubaland. Yorùbá religion is formed of diverse traditions and has no single founder. It has influenced or given birth to thriving ways of life such as Lucumí, Umbanda and Candomblé.[1] Yoruba religious beliefs are part of itan, the total complex of songs, histories, stories and other cultural concepts which make up the Yorùbá society.[1][2][3]

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Beliefs

According to Kola Abimbola, the Yorùbá have evolved a robust philosophy.\[1\] In brief, it holds that all human beings possess what is known as "Àyànmò"\[4\] (destiny, fate) and are expected to eventually become one in spirit with Olódùmarè (Olòrún, the divine creator and source of all energy). Furthermore, the thoughts and actions of each person in Ayé (the physical realm) interact with all other living things, including the Earth itself.\[2\]

Each person attempts to achieve transcendence and find their destiny in Òrún-Réré (the spiritual realm of those who do good and beneficial things). One's Orí-Inu (spiritual consciousness in the physical realm) must grow in order to consummate union with one's "Ipônri" (Orí Òrún, spiritual self).\[4\]

Those who stop growing spiritually, in any of their given lives, are destined for "Òrún-Apadi" (Lit. the invisible realm of potsherds). Life and death are said to be cycles of existence in a series of physical bodies while one's spirit evolves toward transcendence. This evolution is said to be most evident amongst the Orishas, the divine viziers of the Almighty God.

Iwapẹlẹ (or well-balanced) meditation and sincere veneration is sufficient to strengthen the Orí-Inu of most people.\[2\]\[4\] Well-balanced people, it is believed, are able to make positive use of the simplest form of connection between their Oris and the omnipotent Olu-Ọrún: an adúra (petition or prayer) for divine support.
Prayer to one’s Orí Òrún has been known to produce an immediate sensation of joy. Òṣu (Eṣu, the divine messenger) initiates contact with Òrún on behalf of the petitioner, and transmits the prayer to Ayé; the deliverer of àṣẹ or the spark of life. He transmits this prayer without distorting it in any way. Thereafter, the petitioner may be satisfied with a personal answer. In the event that he or she is not, the Ifa oracle of the Orisha Orunmila may also be consulted. All communication with Òrún, whether simplistic in the form of a personal prayer or complicated in the form of that done by an initiated priest of divination, however, is energized by invoking àṣẹ.

In the Yorùbá belief system, Olódùmarè has àṣẹ over all that is. It is for this reason that He is considered supreme.[2]

According to one of the Yorùbá accounts of creation, during a certain stage in this process, the "truth" was sent to confirm the habitability of the newly formed planets. The earth being one of these was visited but deemed too wet for conventional life.

After a successful period of time, a number of divinities were commanded to accomplish the task of helping earth develop its crust. On one of their visits to the realm, the arch-divinity Obatala took to the stage equipped with a mollusk that held in its shell some form of soil; two winged beasts and some cloth like material. He emptied the soil onto what soon became a large mound on the surface of the water and soon after, the winged-beasts began to scatter this around until the point where it gradually made into a large patch of dry land; the various indentations they created eventually becoming hills and valleys.[5]

Obatala leaped on to a high-ground and named the place Ife. The land became fertile and plant life began to flourish. From handfuls of earth he began to mould figurines. Meanwhile, as this was happening on earth, Olódùmarè gathered the gasses from the far reaches of space and
sparked an explosion that shaped into a fireball. He subsequently sent it to Ife, where it dried much of the land and simultaneously began to bake the motionless figurines. It was at this point that Olódúmarè released the "breath of life" to blow across the land, and the figurines slowly came into "being" as the first people of Ife.\[^5\]

For this reason, Ile-Ife is locally referred to as the "cradle of existence".\[^5\]

**Olódúmarè**

Main article: Olodumare

Olódúmarè is the most important "state of existence".\[^5\] Regarded as being all-encompassing, no gender can therefore be assigned. Hence, it is common to hear references to "it" or "they" (although this is meant to address a somewhat singularity) in usual speech. "They" are the owner of all heads, for during human creation, Olódúmarè gave "èmí" (the breath of life) to humankind. In this, Olódúmarè is Supreme\[^5\]

Perhaps one of the most important human endeavors extolled within the tribe's literary corpus is the quest to better one's "Iwa" (character, behaviour). In this way the teachings transcends religious doctrine, advising as it does that a person must also better his civic, social and intellectual spheres of being; every stanza of the sacred Ifa oracular poetry has a portion covering the importance of "Iwa". Central to this is the theme of righteousness, both individual and collective.\[^6\]

**An Alternative Version Of The Creation**

The Yorùbá regard Olódúmarè as the principal agent of creation.
In another telling of the creation myth, Olódùmarè (also called Olorun) is the creator. In the beginning there is only water. Olódùmarè sends Obatala to bring forth land. Obatala descended from above on a long chain, bringing with him a rooster, some earth, and some iron. He stacked the iron in the water, the earth on the iron, and the chicken atop the earth. The chicken kicked and scattered the earth, creating land. Some of the other divinities descended upon it to live with Obatala. One of them, Chameleon, came first to judge if the earth was dry. When he said that it was, Olódùmarè called the land Ife for "wide". Obatala then created humans out of earth and called Olódùmarè to blow life into them. Some say Obatala was jealous and wished to be the only giver of life, but Olódùmarè put him to sleep as he worked. Conversely, it is also said by others that it is Obatala who shapes life while it is still in the womb.\[7\]

**Divinities**

Main article: Orisha

An Orisha (Orisa or Orixa) is an entity that possesses the capability of reflecting some of the manifestations of Olódùmarè. Yorùbá Orishas (translated "owners of heads") are often described as intermediaries between man and the supernatural. The term is often translated as "deities" or "divinities".\[8\]

Orisha(s) are more like "anamistic entities" and have control over specific elements in nature, thus being better referred to as the divinities. Even so, there are those of their number that are more akin to ancient heroes and/or sages\[3\]. These are best addressed as dema deities. Even though in the basics of things, the term Orisha is often used to acknowledge a many divine entities, is mainly reserved for the former.\[3\]
Orishas   Attributes

Orunmila
The Yorùbá Grand Priest and custodian of the Ifa Oracle, source of knowledge who is believed to oversee the knowledge of the Human Form, Purity, the Cures of illnesses and deformities. His subordinate priests or followers are the Awos.

Èsù or Elegbara
Often ill-translated as "The Devil" or "The Evil Being", Èsù is in truth neither of these. Best referred to as "The Trickster", he deals a hand of misfortune to those that do not offer tribute or are deemed to be spiritual novices. Also regarded as the "divine messenger", a prime negotiator between negative and positive forces in the body and an enforcer of the "law of being". He is said to assist in enhancing the power derived from herbal medicines.

Eshu is the orisha of chance, accident and unpredictability. Because he is Olorun's linguist and the master of languages, Eshu is responsible for carrying messages and sacrifices from humans to the Sky God. Also known for his phallic powers and exploits. Eshu is said to lurk at gateways, on the highways and at the crossroads, where he introduces chance and accident into the lives of humans. Known by a variety of names, including Elegbara.[9]

Ogun
The divinity of iron and metallurgy.

Yemoja
Mother of Waters, Nurturer of Water Resources. According to Olorishas, she is the amniotic fluid in the womb of the pregnant woman, as well as the breasts which nurture. She is considered the protective energy of the feminine force.

Oshun
Wife of the former Oba of Oyo called Shango (another Yoruba Orisha, see below) is said to've turned into a river in Osogbo. The Yoruba clerics ascribed to her Sensuality, Beauty and
Gracefulness, symbolizing both their people's search for clarity and a flowing motion. She is associated with several powers, including abilities to heal with cool water, induction of fertility and the control of the feminine essence. Women appeal to her for child-bearing and for the alleviation of female disorders. The Yoruba traditions describe her as being fond of babies and her intervention is sought if a baby becomes ill. Oshun is also known for her love of honey.

Associated with Virility, Masculinity, Fire, Lightning, Stones, Warriors and Magnetism. He is said to have the abilities to transform base substances into those that are pure and valuable. He was the Oba of Oyo at some point in its history. He derived his nickname Oba Koso from the tales of his immortality. Shango is the orisha of the thunderbolt, said to have ruled in ancient times over the kingdom of Oyo. Also known as Jakuta (Stone Thrower) and as Oba Koso (The King Does Not Hang).

The other wife of the former Oba of Oyo called Shango (another Yoruba Orisha, see above), she is said to've turned into the River Niger. She is often described as the Tempest, Guardian of the Cemetery, Winds of Change, Storms and Progression. Due to her personal power, she is usually depicted as being in the company of her husband Shango. Orisha of rebirth.

**Irúnmôlè**

Irúnmôlè are entities sent by the Supreme (Olódùmarè) to complete given tasks, often acting as liaisons between Orun (the invisible realm) and Aiye (the physical realm).[3] Irúnmôlè(s) can best be described as ranking divinities; whereby such divinities are regarded as the principal Orishas.

**Reincarnation**
The Yoruba believe in reincarnation within the family. The names Babatunde (father returns), Yetunde (Mother returns), Babatunji (Father wakes once again) and Sotunde (The wise man returns) all offer vivid evidence of the Ifa concept of familial or lineal rebirth. There is no simple guarantee that your grandfather or great uncle will "come back" in the birth of your child, however.

Whenever the time arrives for a spirit to return to Earth (otherwise known as The Marketplace) through the conception of a new life in the direct bloodline of the family, one of the component entities of a person's being returns, while the other remains in Heaven (Ikole Orun). The spirit that returns does so in the form of a Guardian Ori. One's Guardian Ori, which is represented and contained in the crown of the head, represents not only the spirit and energy of one's previous blood relative, but the accumulated wisdom he or she has acquired through a myriad of lifetimes. This is not to be confused with one’s spiritual Ori, which contains personal destiny, but instead refers to the coming back to The Marketplace of one's personal blood Ori through one's new life and experiences.[10] The Primary Ancestor (which should be identified in your Itefa) becomes - if you are aware and work with that specific energy - a “guide” for the individual throughout their lifetime.[11] At the end of that life they return to their identical spirit self and merge into one, taking the additional knowledge gained from their experience with the individual as a form of payment.

**Yoruba religion around the world**

Main article: Yoruba history

According to Professor S. A. Akintoye, the Yorùbá are/were exquisite statesmen spread across the globe in an unprecedented fashion;[12] the reach of their culture is largely due to migration of
personnel. Some of this movement occurred during periods that pre-date the Egyptian dynasties; whilst the most recent migration occurred during the "holocaust" (i.e. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade) of the 1300–1900. During this period of holocaust, many were captured and sold into the Atlantic slave trade and transported to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Venezuela and other parts of the World. With them, they carried their religious beliefs. The school-of-thought integrated into what now constitutes the core of the "New World lineages":\[12][13][14][15]

- Santería or "regla lucumi" (Cuba)
- Oyotunji (U.S.)
- Candomblé (Brazil)
- Umbanda (Brazil)
- Batuque (Brazil)

**Relationship with Vodou**

The popularly known Vodou faith, said to have originated amongst a different ethnic group (the Gba speaking peoples of modern Benin, Togo and Ghana), shares some similarities with the religion, and may even be taken to be theologically related on a superficial level.\[16]

**See also**

- Orunmila
- Ifá
• Iya Nla

• Iyanla Vanzant, an African American author who is ordained as a Yoruba priestess.\[17\]

• Legends of Africa

• Yoruba Deities

• Yoruba people

References


3. \(^{a \ b \ c \ d}\) J. Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas*, Athelia Henrietta PR, 1996. ISBN 0-9638787-8-6


6. \(^{a}\) Ifaloju (February 2011). "Iwòrì Méjì:Ifá speaks on Righteousness". S.S. Popoola, Ifa Dida, Library, INC.
7. Leeming & Leeming 2009 – entry “Yoruba”.

8. Cf. The Concept of God: The People of Yoruba for the acceptability of the translation

9. Tales of Yoruba gods & heroes by Harold Courlander

Retrieved 2012-04-08.

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**Further reading**

- Chief S. Solagbade Popoola Library, INC Ifa Dida Volume Two (OgbeYeku - OgbeFun) ISBN 978-1-926538-12-9
• Dr. Jonathan Olumide Lucas, "The Religion of the Yorubas", Lagos 1948, C. M. S. Bookshop.


• Ase Magazine titles: Olodumare, Irunmole, Irunmole Faithfuls, Obatala, Ogun, Yemoja, Esu, Orunmila, Osun, etc. Ibile Faith Society. (Nigeria/Germany) www.yorubareligion.org

• Miguel R. Bances – Baba Eshu Onare, Tratado Enciclopedico de Ifa. Los 16 Meyis y sus Omoluos u Odus o Signos de Ifa.


**External links**

• The Lost Truth of the Yoruba

• Yoruban cosmology and mythology

• Ibeji

• Ifa Books/The 16 Mayis and Omoluos

• Yorùbá Religious Community in Portugal

• Traditional Yorùbá site dedicated to teaching
- Ifa Studies Podcast hosted by Awoyinfa Ifaloju on iTunes
- West African Orisa Tradition of Nigeria
- Yoruba Movies & Films Yoruba Theatre is the origin of Nigeria's Nollywood, the equivalent of America's Hollywood.

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Yorùbá religion (Oriṣa-Ifá)

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- Ahl-e Haqq

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- Manichaeism

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- Yazidi

- Zoroastrianism
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