God Is Not One

The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter

Stephen Prothero

HarperOne
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

CHAPTER SIX

Yoruba Religion

THE WAY OF CONNECTION

In my introduction to religion courses I ask my students to invent their own religions. They form groups and dream up new religions. They then pitch their religious creations online and in class. After every group has had a chance to evangelize, everyone votes (with fake money in makeshift collection plates) for the new religion they like the best. Over the years my students have attacked this assignment with intelligence, humor, and creativity. One group invented ♪ism, a religion inspired by the grooves of rapper Tupac Shakur and the inscrutability of the artist formerly known as The Artist Formerly Known as Prince, which promised a posthumous "After-Party" for those who followed its injunction to "respect the rhythm." Another tried to convert us to The Congregation of Wisdom, which honors *Jeopardy!* phenom Ken Jennings as its patron saint. Meanwhile, Sertaism and ZZZ aimed not at salvation but at a good night's sleep.[1]

Many of my students' religious inventions were quite profound, however, and the one that moved me the most was Consectationism (from the Latin for "pursuit"). The goal of this religion is to find and follow your own purpose, or "Lex." And its ethic is simplicity personified: pursue your own Lex, and don't hinder anyone else from pursuing theirs. In their class presentation, modeled after evangelical Bible-camp skits, Consectationists offered revival-style testimonies about "The Sign of the Covenant," the sky-opening moment when each found his or her own Lex. Much of our sad-

ness and suffering, the students observed, comes from trying to live a life other than our own. So each of us should seek to discover our purpose and pursue it with passion and resolve.

Consectationism is, of course, make-believe, while Yoruba religion of West Africa and its diasporas is a venerable global tradition. But the heart of Consectationism lies surprisingly close to the heart of the religion of the Yoruba people. Here, too, each of us has a destiny we have somehow forgotten. Before we are reborn (the Yoruba affirm reincarnation), one of our souls (we have two or more, depending on who is doing the counting) appears before the High God Olodumare to receive new breath. Olodumare then allows us to choose our own destiny, which includes the day we will return to heaven, our personality, our occupation, and our own unique measure of good and bad luck. With birth comes forgetting, however. So we wander through life veiled from our true purposes, sidetracked by pursuits, in love and work, foisted on us by parents, friends, coworkers, and spouses. The antidote to this forgetfulness is to remember—to recover our destiny so we can do what we were created to do for ourselves, our families, and the world.

Happily, we are not alone in this task. There is a vast pantheon of superhuman beings, known as orishas (orixas in Brazil, orichas in Cuba), able and willing to help us live in harmony with our destiny.[2] There are a variety of techniques of divination that can bring the wisdom of these orishas to our ears. And there are specially trained priests and diviners, known as *babalawos* (if men) or *iyalawos* (if women), who through *Ifa*, the most venerable and venerated of these divination techniques, are able to help us recover our destiny, protect it through sacrifice, and fulfill it through action in the world. In fact, one of the first tasks of any parent is to take one's child to a diviner so that its destiny can be read and revealed.

Although *babalawo* means "father of secrets" and *iyalawo* "mother of secrets," diviners do not dispense any secret wisdom themselves. They know how to cast the sixteen palm nuts or the eight-half-seed-shells divining chain used to begin any consultation with a client. They have memorized at least a thousand Ifa verses—four for each of the 256 possible signatures (16 x 16) that the random casting of the palm nuts or divining chain produces. They chant a series of poems associated with each signature, or *odu*, including verses that prescribe the required sacrifice. But rather than oracles, these diviners are mediators between clients and orishas. So while the simplest way to understand what is happening when a client goes for a consultation is that the diviner is channeling the wisdom of the orishas to a human being, that is not quite right, since for the Yoruba, as for the ancient Greeks, wisdom is recalling what we already know within.

To understand Ifa divination, it is important to note how active the client is and how passive the babalawo. First, the client does not even tell the babalawo why she has come. She might have boyfriend troubles, or husband troubles, or both. She might be sick or be trying to decide whether to take a new job or move to a new town. She may be seeking prosperity or pregnancy or trying to fend off depression or loneliness. But her presenting problem is a mystery to him. Second, it is the client, not the babalawo, who decides which of the recited stories (typically at least four per signature) is appropriate to her conflict. What the babalawo brings to the table (or to the floor, actually, since this practice takes place with both babalawo and client firmly rooted to the earth) is a prodigious memory for the poems associated with each of the 256 signatures and an ability to chant the verses chosen by his client. But it is the client who does the choosing.

It should also be emphasized that the Yoruba put huge stock in the capacities of human beings. According to the Yoruba tradition, each human being has a physical body called *ara*. Each person also has at least two souls: one, called *emi*, associated with breath, and another, called *ori*, associated with destiny. The term *ori* literally means head, but in this context it refers to the spiritual center that chooses its destiny. This ori in each of us is animated by the same sacred power that animates the orishas: *ashe* (*ache* in Cuba and *axe*

in Brazil). So whatever channeling is happening in Ifa divination is happening between us and the orishas. It is also happening between the part of us that remembers and the part of us that forgets, which is to say between our more divine and our more human selves. Far from demanding our subservience, therefore, the babalawo is helping to call us back to our original selves, to recover the destinies we chose for this life before it began.

At the beginning of a reading, the babalawo touches the palm nuts to his client's ori. "You know the mystery," he says to the client. He then touches the palm nuts to the divining tray, which carries the image of the messenger orisha Eshu. "You know the mystery," he says to Orunmila (aka Ifa), the orisha of wisdom. And then he adds, "I know nothing." Ifa divination works not because the babalawo is superhuman but because the ori is itself a god within. As a Yoruba proverb goes, "The head [ori] is the greatest Òrìşà."[3]

The Orishas

Yoruba religion varies widely across time and space—from the traditional practices of West Africa to the contemporary Yoruba-derived adaptations of Candomble in Brazil and Santeria in Cuba. And there are strong arguments for treating these adaptations as separate religions of their own—"rhizomes" of the Yoruba tradition that may be connected at the roots but, by virtue of new soils and new climates, have become distinct plants.[4] However, practitioners of these traditions are sufficiently closely connected—far more closely, in fact, than Mormons, Protestants, and Catholics—to be treated together here. And, together these Yoruba practitioners share the view that the human problem is disconnection and that the solution to this problem is to reconnect ourselves to our destinies, to one another, and to sacred power. This can be accomplished through the techniques of divination, sacrifice, and spirit/body possession, which in combination allow us to truly flourish as individuals and societies.

The Yoruba cosmos is awash in sacred power. There are malevolent spirits, called *ajogun*, who can make your life a living hell if you cross them. There are ancestor spirits, known as *egungun*, who can get up and dance at festivals and, like the *ajogun*, are endowed with ashe. But the powerhouses of ashe are the orishas. In this tradition of communication and exchange between human beings and the divine, devotees consult the orishas through the technique of divination and feed the orishas through the technique of sacrifice. The orishas respond by listening to their devotees and making things happen for them.

Orishas come in at least three overlapping types, running from those who are plainly divine to those who might be better described as superhuman. First, there are orishas who were present with Olodumare at creation: Obatala, Eshu, and Orunmila. Second, there are personifications of natural forces—Yemoja as the sea and Oshun as the river—who flip the script of Christian incarnation by becoming divine not by taking on a human body but by disappearing into a river or hill. A third type comprises deified ancestors who once walked the earth as mere mortals, such as the ancient Yoruba king Oduduwa. These categories are not entirely separate, however. Shango, the god of thunder and lightning, is also said to be a former king of the great Yoruba kingdom of Oyo.

One of the most intriguing facets of the orishas is how inescapably human they act. They have personalities and preferences, including their own distinctive tastes in food, drink, and music. Like Hindu gods, they marry. Unlike Hindu gods, they also divorce. And they are far more passionate than the domesticated gods of the Western monotheisms, where the divine temperament seems almost Scandinavian by comparison.

The gaps between sacred and profane, spirit and matter, the supernatural and the everyday, are at best hairline cracks in Yoruba culture. The distinction between divinity and humanity is equally fuzzy, since human beings carry the awesome power of ashe inside them and orishas are by no means above even the basest human emotions. Many orishas are adept at both creation and destruction.

The storm (and stormy) deity Oya, for example, brings both the abundance of irrigation and the devastation of floods. Orishas are sometimes compared to Greek gods for their foibles and fallibility, but the comparison is not quite apt, because the orishas suffer for their misdeeds, while it is quite common for Zeus and his friends to get off scot-free. Moreover, most orishas live in the earth rather than on mountains or in the sky (Shango and Olodumare are the notable exceptions).

So Yoruba religion is reciprocal—a system of communication and exchange between human beings and the divine mediated by a vast pantheon of powers (many of them former human beings) with one foot in the natural realm and the other in the supernatural. Here both sides speak and both sides listen. As in Hinduism, both sides give and both sides receive. Without the orishas to empower them, human beings would die. But without human beings to feed them, the orishas would die too. As a Yoruba proverb puts it, "If humanity were not, the gods would not be."[5]

Since Yoruba culture is oral by tradition, you might think that there would be an extensive iconography built up around the orishas. Not so. Classically, orishas are represented in shrines through natural rather than artistic objects: stones and herbs rather than paintings and statues. In the New World, the orishas were traditionally worshipped via images of the Catholic saints with whom they were identified. Only in recent decades have images of the orishas themselves started to circulate. This is because the Yoruba approach the divine largely through stories. If, as Régis Debray contends, "to lack a legend is also to lack dignity," then the Yoruba are a dignified people indeed.[6]

Yoruba stories can be found in the massive Ifa corpus memorized and chanted by babalawos. Here the orishas seem to be "one of us" rather than sacred in the sense of "set apart." In addition to the full range of human emotions, they exhibit a full complement of virtues and vices. Like the Hindu gods, they do not present themselves as either wholly good or wholly evil. They can be generous and petty, merciful and vengeful. They can harm as well as heal. And so they challenge us not to eradicate evil but to balance it with good, and not only "out there" in the world but also inside ourselves (where good and evil coexist). This complexity has long troubled Christians, Muslims, and scholars alike, who all too often fail to see the lessons lurking underneath the orishas' moral failings, as if they have stumbled upon a double bill of *King Lear* and *Othello* and have nothing more to say than that Edmund and Iago don't seem to be proper gentlemen. Of course, Yoruba practitioners have no trouble unearthing these lessons, just as Shakespeare's audiences saw the complexities of human existence acted out on the Elizabethan stage. But the fact that the gods stumble and stir is one of Yoruba religion's glories. The Yoruba corpus, writes art historian Robert Farris Thompson, provides a "limitless horizon of vivid moral beings."[7]

Ashe is the key concept in Yoruba thought, and its central meaning is the awesome power to make things happen. But secreted inside this power is the equally awesome power to make things change. So to observe that the orishas change—to see that they are, to borrow from Karen McCarthy Brown, "larger than life but not other than life"—is not to find fault.[8] It is to praise them for drawing near to the human condition, for refusing to hold themselves above and beyond the rest of us. After all, the biblical God is only *said* to be good. He does evil things, or permits them, which for an omnipotent being is almost as bad, leaving believers scurrying to justify God's actions (or inactions). In Yoruba religion no such theological gymnastics are necessary.

While traveling in Bali, I was struck at how much could be (and was) made by Balinese Hindus of their vast system of correspondences of gods to the cardinal directions, to colors, to parts of the body, and to foods. The system of correspondences in orisha devotion is even more extensive. At least in the New World, the orishas are most famously associated with Catholic saints, but they are also associated with numbers, colors, emblems, virtues, herbs, clothing, jewelry, temperaments, land formations, bodies of water, parts of the body, days of the week, occupations, natural forces, drum beats,

songs, dance steps, foods they will not eat, and foods they cannot do without. To take just one example, Cuban devotees of Oshun associate her not only with Our Lady of Charity (the patron saint of Cuba) but also with love, rivers, gold, fertility, the lower abdomen, seduction, fans, seashells, brass, the color yellow, the number five, and pumpkins.

So Yoruba religion is not simply a system of communication and exchange between the divine and human realms. It is also a map to every mountain and valley of human experience, a system of signs and wonders out of which one can make meaning from seemingly small and unrelated things. One Candomble practitioner in Brazil refracted the television show *Gilligan's Island* through the prisms of two goddesses, Oxum (Oshun) and Iansa (Oya). To Candomble devotees, these two goddesses embody very different feminine forces—the "cool" coquette Oxum and the "hot" bombshell Iansa. But to this practitioner (and TV aficionado) Oxum was Ginger and Iansa, Mary Ann.[9] The net effect of this net of correspondences is to make everything, everyone, and everywhere potentially sacred. Every moment presents a possibility to reconnect with the orishas and, through them, with your destiny and the harmony that pursuing it brings.

Devotees disagree about just how many orishas there are. One reason the orishas are hard to count is that, like Hindu divinities, they answer to different names in different places, so it is often unclear when you meet a new orisha whether she really is a new acquaintance or someone you have already met under another name. The accounting traditionally runs to either 401 or 601—with the plus-one gesturing at the fact that in Yoruba culture there is always room for one more at the table. But one text speaks of 3,200, and some claim there is really only one divinity—that the "lesser" divinities we call orishas are all manifestations of the High God Olodumare.[10]

Keeping up with the orishas is easier in the New World than in West Africa, because in the transatlantic passage many orishas went missing. Most Brazilian and Cuban practitioners recognize

only one or two dozen orishas. Some whittle that pantheon down to the "Seven Powers" (typically four men and three women), which sounds helpful until you realize that, like the Ten Commandments, these *siete potencias* vary depending on who is reciting them.[11]

Orishas can be classified into male and female, sky and earth, hot and cool, forest and town. But Yoruba practitioners, in keeping with their strong preference for action over belief, do not typically worry themselves about such things. Neither do they fret about the afterlife. What really matters is how to get the orishas to intervene on your behalf in thisworldly matters of love, luck, and work. In order to do that, you need to get to know them—what they eat, what they wear, and how they sing and dance.

Olodumare

The Supreme Being for orisha devotees is Olodumare, also known as Olorun ("Owner of the Sky"), who rules the cosmos from on high. Like the God of Deism, Olodumare is as remote, distant, and difficult to approach as your steely great-grandfather. Unlike the God of Deism, he did not create the world, choosing to delegate that job to others.

Though practitioners will occasionally send prayers in his direction, they don't worship Olodumare directly. He has no temples, no liturgy, and no priests. He does not possess devotees in festivals. Although all sacrifices in some sense run through him, no one sacrifices to him directly. Like the abstract Hindu creator god Brahma, Olodumare is respected more than he is revered. When it comes to the day-to-day concerns that stand at the center of Yoruba religion, practitioners go to "lesser" agents for help. So Yoruba devotion focuses on them.

There is some disagreement about whether Olodumare was present at the creation of Yoruba religion or whether he is a relatively recent invention—a nod to the same monotheistic imperative that pushed Hindu intellectuals under British rule to shrink

the Hindu pantheon to one. There is also disagreement about whether the orishas are emanations of Olodumare or whether he is an abstraction of them. A parallel conversation concerns whether other orishas do the heavy lifting when it comes to answering prayers or whether those boons come from Olodumare himself (with the orishas acting merely as intercessors). Regardless of the details of the relationship between this sky god and these "lesser deities," Yoruba practitioners today speak of Olodumare as the chief source of power—"the supreme quintessence of *àshe*"—in a religious tradition that is all about power.[12]

Eshu

Of all the orishas, Eshu and Orunmila are the most important. In this religion of communication and connection between *orun* and *aiye* (heaven and earth), Orunmila the diviner delivers messages from above to humans, while Eshu the messenger delivers (or refuses to deliver) sacrifices from below to orishas and other spiritual beings. Without Eshu, interactions between heaven and earth would cease and human existence would spin into chaos. Though there is no priesthood devoted to him, images of Eshu can be found in almost every Yoruba home, and all shrines make at least a small place for him. That is because every sacrifice must include what gamblers call a rake for Eshu. If you don't feed him a little palm oil or tobacco (both personal favorites) at the beginning of a sacrifice, he won't have the energy, or the inclination, to do your bidding. For this reason Eshu is also known as Elegbara (or Elegba or Legba), which means "owner of the power" (of ashe).

Like Hinduism's Ganesha, Eshu is associated with crossroads, because as the holder of ashe he has the power to take almost any situation in whatever direction he pleases. Crossroads are important in many religious traditions. Jesus, of course, is remembered by the sign of the cross, and the most popular Hindu divinity, Ganesha, is lord of the crossroads. The crossroads is the meeting place of the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the

invisible, the known and the unknown. It is heads and tails, left and right, where power lines cross and sparks fly. Here two roads diverge, and we determine our destinies by choosing the road less (or more) traveled.

As the guardian of crossroads, Eshu clears the way for those who attend to him and puts up roadblocks for those who neglect him. He inserts uncertainty and unpredictability into a world otherwise governed by fate, and he then sits back and laughs at the chaos that follows. So Eshu is a trickster, too, an ambiguous figure—both policeman and troublemaker—whom Christians have long confused with the devil. The Yoruba divide their pantheon into two halves, which my former colleague Wande Abimbola refers to as "gods" and "anti-gods"—the orishas on the right, who represent benevolence, and the *ajogun* on the left, who represent malevolence. As someone who straddles the two, Eshu isn't above getting into a little mischief now and then. Or, as an Ifa verse puts it, "Death, Disease, Loss, Paralysis, Big Trouble, Curse, Imprisonment, Affliction. They are all errand boys of *Esu*."[13]

One of his most popular tales tells of Eshu stirring up trouble yet again. His colors are red and black, so he struts down the middle of the street with a trendy cap (impossible not to notice) colored red on one side and black on the other. People on one side of the street admire his fashionable red cap, but people on the other side of the street insist that his cap is black. The row that ensues (quite bloody in many versions) brings a wry smile to Eshu's lips, solidifying his role as a maker of mischief and disturber of the peace.

Today this messenger orisha is associated with the Internet, and with travel and transportation. If your car is hit at a crosswalk, or your hard drive wipes out all your emails, you may have crossed Eshu. But perhaps more than anything else, Eshu is associated with change. Every day we stand at a crossroads of some sort. It is Eshu whose provocations jerk us out of drift. He helps us find which way our destiny is calling us and gives us the courage to move forward in that direction.

Orunmila

As the mastermind behind Ifa divination, Orunmila (aka Orula and Orunla) is, according to some devotees, the "preeminent orisha" and "the cornerstone of Yoruba religion, metaphysics, and spirituality."[14] There is some disagreement about whether Orunmila, the orisha of wisdom, and Ifa, the orisha of destiny, are different people, or whether the two are just different names for the same ancient sage—the Yoda of orisha devotion.

Orunmila is the owner of the Ifa corpus, the great storehouse of wisdom of Yoruba mythology, philosophy, ethics, and theology. Because he was present at creation, Orunmila is said to know the destinies of humans and orishas alike. Given his omniscience, which includes the ability to predict the future, he is, according to many Yoruba, second only to Olodumare, though partisans of Eshu will dispute this interpretation. For some Yoruba practitioners, Orunmila, who is associated with harmony and stability, and his friend Eshu, who is associated with chaos and change, form, along with Olodumare, a sort of trinity. Although Orunmila is said to be short and very dark—"black as Ifa" is a common Yoruba saying—he is almost never represented in sculptures. That is because the spoken word is his métier. Although he will occasionally possess his priests in West Africa, he does not do so in the New World, where he is typically associated with St. Francis.

Oshun

Oshun, the "Ginger" of the Yoruba pantheon, is the orisha of rivers and sweet water, particularly of Nigeria's Osun River with which she is closely associated. She was the only female present at creation and the first to perform Ifa divination. In West Africa she is an orisha of fertility and childbearing, but in the New World she becomes something of a goddess of love. A great beauty, covered with brass bling and awash in husbands, lovers, and children, Oshun is the "Yoruba Venus" and the Shakti of the New World.[15]

But Oshun, whose beverage of choice is maize beer, is not all sweetness and light and grace on the dance floor. As with so many orishas, her power cuts both ways. Yes, she helps women in childbirth, but she's also good with knives and deadly poisons. Oshun is even more ruthless in love, however. She doesn't just play the field, she tears it up. She dumped Shango because he started to drink a beer she hated. She dumped Orishanla because he started eating snails. In the end, she tired of all the drama and got herself out of the love racket entirely by turning herself into a river.

One wonderful story about Oshun tells of Olodumare sending seventeen gods to order the earth. Only one of these orishas, Oshun, was female. So the male gods, who could count and thought that women were weak anyway, refused to involve her. She retaliated by withholding water from the earth. Without rain and rivers, crops could not grow, mothers could not drink, and babies could not nurse. So everything went to hell, and the old-boys' network went to Olodumare to gripe. But Olodumare would have nothing of it. He rebuked the male orishas for refusing to work with Oshun. So they apologized to her, and she accepted their apology, but only after they promised to respect her authority in the future.[16]

Obatala

Obatala ("king of the white cloth") or Orishanla ("great orisha") is the god of human creation who first fashioned clay into human form. Although Oshun is sometimes credited with human conception, it is Obatala who molds the stuff of the embryo into the shape of a human being. Obatala (Oxala in Brazil), the oldest and wisest of the orishas, is the quintessence of "cool," one of the central values in Yoruba culture. A model of the sort of patience that makes for peace, he has "the aesthetics of the saint."[17] As his name suggests, Obatala is associated with whiteness. His devotees dress in white and wear lead bangles. His temple walls are whitewashed, and he enjoys white fruits, white yams, white birds (especially doves), and

other white foods such as rice and coconuts (though, for the record, he does *not* like salt, or for that matter pepper).

The most commonly told story about Obatala (who also has a serious aversion to dogs) speaks of his getting drunk on palm wine while he was supposed to be creating the world. As a result, that job had to be taken over by Oduduwa, who used a five-toed chicken to spread sand over the water in all directions, as far as the eye could see. When Obatala woke up from his drunken stupor, he swore off palm wine not only for himself but also for his followers. When it came to making human beings, however, Obatala fell off the wagon. Botching this job, too, he created albinos, dwarfs, hunchbacks, and other physically deformed people, who to this day are sacred both to him and to the Yoruba—*eni orisha*, god's people.

Obatala also played a role in legitimizing the Cuban Revolution of 1959. On January 8, 1959, just days after Castro and his guerrillas took Havana, a white dove alit on his shoulder during his speech for national unity. The white dove symbolizes Christianity's Holy Spirit, but it also symbolizes Obatala, so in his first public act as leader of this new nation, Castro saw the support of both Catholicism and Santeria literally land on his shoulder.[18]

Ogun

Worlds apart from cool Obatala is hot Ogun, the orisha of iron. Ogun (Ogum in Brazil and Ogou in Haiti) has classically been associated with tool making, hunting, and war—the sword, the spear, and the soldier. Because he made the first tool, he is also the god of creativity and technology. In a wonderful example of the elasticity of Yoruba religion, Ogun came in the modern period to be connected not just with iron but with metals of all sorts. Today he is the orisha of both the locomotive and the speeding bullet, patronized by not only blacksmiths and barbers but also train conductors, auto mechanics, truck drivers, airline pilots, and astronauts. If you were injured in a car accident, you may have offended this orisha of creation and

destruction, who in the New World is worshipped as St. Peter, St. Anthony, and St. George.

Although Ogun put in an occasional appearance in the 1980s television series *Miami Vice*, his big moment in the Yoruba story came in primordial time. Kabbalistic Judaism speaks of a lonely God who creates humans in order to know and be known, love and be loved. In the Yoruba story human beings have already been created, but the orishas are lonely nonetheless because with the shattering of the original unity of the cosmos their realm has been cordoned off from the realm of us mortals. Eventually the orishas decide to reunite with human beings. But the abyss separating *orun* (sky) from *aiye* (earth) has been choked by chaotic overgrowth of cosmic proportions. So, try as they might, the orishas cannot make passage. At this point brave Ogun comes to the rescue. He snatches iron ore out of the primordial chaos and fires it into a tool powerful enough to whack his way across the abyss; in so doing, he clears a path for the other orishas to descend to earth behind him.

Ogun eventually made his way to Ire, in modern-day Nigeria, where he was lauded as "he who goes forth where other gods have turned." But soon he made a huge mistake. He went into battle while under the influence of palm wine, and in a drunken rage slew friends and foes alike. Although the people of Ire still wanted him to serve them as king—who better to administer justice than someone who was himself so intimate with injustice?—he was not so quick to forgive and forget. Withdrawing to the surrounding hills, he spent his time beating swords into plowshares as a farmer (and/or a hunter). He did not give up alcohol, however, and neither do his devotees. In another version of the story, Ogun turned his sword on himself after he saw what he had done and then disappeared into the earth. Either way, Ogun is one of the Yoruba's great tragic figures. The celebrated Nigerian Nobel laureate, poet, and playwright Wole Soyinka sees him as an embodiment of "Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues"—"the first actor . . . first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger, and conqueror of transition."[19]

Ogun has been depicted largely as a god of violence and blood (his color is red), but like the bellicose Hindu goddess Kali he is also a god of justice who uses his pathbreaking abilities to uproot oppression. Praise songs refer to him as a "protector of orphans" and a "roof over the homeless," and in courts traditional Yoruba swear to tell the truth not by putting a hand on the Bible but by kissing iron.[20] Ogun's abilities in war, commitments to justice, and capacities of creative transformation have made him even more popular in the Americans than in Africa. He was a major figure in the drives for Cuban independence in 1959 and Nigerian independence in 1960. Some claim that in the Cuban Revolution Ogun mattered more than Marx himself.

Shango, Oya, Shopona, Yemoja, and Osanyin

Other important orishas include: Shango (also Xango and Chango), god of thunder and lightning—the "storm on the edge of a knife" according to one praise song[21]—and, in modern times, electricity, who also embodies virility and male sexuality; Oya (also Iansa), ruler of Ira, goddess of the Niger River, guardian of cemeteries, and owner of the wind, who sends strong gusts in advance of her husband Shango's storms ("Without her," it is said, "Shango cannot fight");[22] Shopona (aka Babaluaye, "Father, Lord of the World," and Obaluaye), god of smallpox and other contagious diseases (but also of healing), who walks with a limp but is so feared that many Yoruba treat him like Voldemort of Harry Potter fame, refusing to utter his name; Yemoja (aka Yemaja and Yemanja), goddess of the ocean and of motherhood, who while dancing sways her hips like the tides; and Osanyin, one-legged, one-eyed, one-armed god of healing herbs who speaks in a squeaky Pee Wee Herman voice and graces botanica signs from Havana to New York City.

Ashe

What makes these orishas orishas is power, which in Yoruba religion goes by the name of ashe. Ashe is often described in metaphors that yoke science and religion—as sacred force or superhuman energy or spiritual electricity. So ashe is akin to the life force that the Chinese call *qi*. The closest rendering into English of this term, which literally means "So be it," or "May it happen," is probably just "Amen." But the best definition comes from Robert Farris Thompson who calls it the "the power-to-make-things-happen."[23]

Yoruba practitioners recognize Ile-Ife, where the orishas created human beings and set the world in motion, as a center of ashe. Ashe also accumulates in Candomble and Santeria centers (*terreiros* and *casas*, respectively). But this same sacred power can be found as well in orishas, priests, diviners, chiefs, family heads, and ordinary human beings. It resides in "spoken words, secret names, thoughts, blood, beaded necklaces, ritually prepared clothing, earth, leaves, herbs, flowers, trees, rain, rivers, mountains, tornadoes, thunder, lightning, and other natural phenomena."[24] And it manifests in drumming and dance, poetry and song. Just as Hindus have been criticized for worshipping statues, the Yoruba have been criticized for worshipping rocks. But what the Yoruba approach with awe is not the rock but the sacred power that animates it.

In whatever form, ashe directs itself toward change. Because Yoruba religion is eminently practical, ashe is about having real effects in the real world—"as luck, power, wealth, beauty, charisma, children, and love."[25] Thompson's definition emphasizes the fact that ashe makes things happen. But ashe also makes things stop. Every time the palm nuts are cast and an odu is spoken, this tradition testifies to the possibility of growth, not least the possibility of new ways to embody ancient wisdom. Like the orishas themselves, however, ashe is not empowered only toward the good. Its transformative power can be (and is) used toward both good ends and bad.

It connects and disconnects. And when it comes to matters of life and death, ashe gives and ashe takes away.

A Global Religion

Books on the world's religions often include a chapter on "primitive," "preliterate," or "primal" religions, as if they were one and the same. All these religions really share, however, is a stubborn refusal to be crammed into the boxes constructed to fit more "advanced" religions. Stuffed into these chapters (which often fall at the end of the book) are all sorts of religious traditions that in many cases have far less in common with one another than do the "advanced" religions. As a result, these chapters often read like half-hearted apologies for the tendency of scholars (many of whom are trained in translating and interpreting scriptures) to gravitate toward religions that emphasize reading and writing over speaking and hearing. But the tendency to lump Australian and Native American and African religions with such lower-case religious phenomena as shamanism, totemism, and animism is driven by another, equally important bias. Just as considerations of black and white have dominated conversations about race in the United States, and considerations of Anglophone and Francophone have dominated conversations about culture in Canada, conversations about the world's religions have been dominated by the East/West divide. In BU's Department of Religion, our year-long introduction to the world's religions is split into Eastern and Western semesters. Unfortunately, this approach obscures and often renders invisible religions that do not fall easily along either side of the East/West divide.[26]

It should not be surprising, therefore, that while Yoruba language, culture, and art have been studied with care for a century or so, Yoruba religion has been either entirely neglected or dumped into that "primal" religions chapter in standard treatments of the world's religions. But the religion of Yorubaland and its diasporas

is its own thing, as distinct from the religion of the Sioux as Buddhism is from Islam. And it, too, is one of the great religions.[27]

Estimates of the number of Yoruba practitioners in West Africa vary widely but doubtless run into the tens of millions. Nigeria, the homeland of the Yoruba people, is Africa's most populous country, and the Yoruba, who can also be found in Benin, Togo, and Sierra Leone, are one of Nigeria's largest ethnic groups. According to Harvard professor Jacob Olupona and Temple professor Terry Rey, the Yoruba number about 25 million in West Africa alone.[28]

Islam and Christianity are now the dominant religions in Nigeria (with 45 percent of the population each), so most of the Nigerian population speaks reverently of either Muhammad or Jesus (or both), and there have been coordinated efforts among both evangelicals and Pentecostals to demonize Yoruba orishas. But even among the converted it is rare to find someone who has entirely banished Yoruba religion from her repertoire. Practitioners of Yoruba religion challenge cherished notions of what religion is and how it functions by refusing to choose between the orishas and Jesus or the orishas and Allah. Who says religion has to be a zero-sum game? Not the Yoruba, who feel quite comfortable seeing the priest on Sunday and the diviner on Monday. Instead of greeting foreign religions with the either/or of Aristotle, they greet them with the both/and of Eshu. As a result, Yoruba beliefs and practices survive not just on their own, among those who have rebuffed the advances of Islamic and Christian missionaries, but also inside Islam and Christianity, which Yoruba Muslims and Christians have stealthily transformed into distribution channels for Yoruba religious culture. Despite efforts by Muslim and Christian purists alike to root out the bugaboo of "syncretism," Muslims and Christians in Yorubaland (including ministers and imams) continue to go to Yoruba diviners and participate in Yoruba festivals. This creolization is particularly plain in Aladura Christianity, a Yoruba/Christian hybrid that trafficks in the thisworldly powers of fervent and frequent prayer. In fact, the term *Aladura* itself attests to even

wider religious mixing among the Yoruba, since the word *adura* derives from the Arabic for intercessory prayer.

Yoruba religion is by no means confined to its African homeland, however. Yoruba-derived religions are also scattered across the African diaspora created by the transatlantic slave trade—in Brazil and Cuba, Colombia and Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Grenada, St. Kitts and St. Vincent, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, Uruguay and Trinidad and Tobago. Yoruba slaves arrived by the millions in South America, the Caribbean, and the United States, as civil wars beset Yorubaland during the nineteenth century and victors sold off their spoils into slavery. These slaves had a huge impact on economic, cultural, and religious life in the Americas. "No African group," writes the pioneering Yoruba scholar William Bascom, "has had greater influence on New World culture than the Yoruba."[29]

In the New World, traditional African religions were denounced as "heathen" and often outlawed. Even drumming was prohibited in the seventeenth century in Haiti and severely restricted in later centuries in Brazil and Cuba. So Yoruba practitioners did what the Yoruba have been doing ever since their orisha of iron, Ogun, forged a path for the gods from heaven to earth: they adapted to difficult circumstances with courage and creativity. This was hard going in the United States, where the ratio of slaves to whites was low, the ratio of American-born to African-born slaves was high, and Protestant slave masters ruthlessly prohibited slave gatherings of any sort. But in Brazil and Cuba, which saw large numbers of Yoruba high priests, frequent arrivals of new slaves from the Old World, a high ratio of slaves to whites, a lingering slave trade (until the 1850s in Brazil and the 1860s in Cuba), and less slave owner opposition to dancing and drumming, Yoruba practitioners kept their religious traditions alive by marrying them to Catholicism. When ordered to cease and desist from the beliefs and practices of their ancestors, Yoruba slaves took their orishas underground and then resurrected them in the guise of the saints: Ogun as St. Peter; Yemoja as Our Lady of Regla; and Oya as St. Theresa. So

things changed, and remained the same. Praise songs to these orishas continued to be sung in the Yoruba language and to Yoruba rhythms, but for the most part devotion now went forward in the idioms of Catholicism and the grammars of Spanish, French, and Portuguese. The overall tale, however, is one of continuity. The list of elements of Yoruba religion that survived the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery runs to divination, spirit/body possession, drumming, dance, initiation, reincarnation, spiritual healing, sacrifice, and, of course, orisha devotion itself.

Were slaves self-consciously conning religious and political authorities by cross-dressing the orishas as Catholic saints and then celebrating their exploits on these saints' feast days? Yes, says Soyinka. Their strategy was to "co-opt the roman catholic deities into the service of Yorùbá deities; then genuflect before them."[30] Some slaves may have been just that strategic, pretending to worship St. Peter when they were actually worshipping Ogun. But it is also possible that Santeria, Candomble, and their Yoruba-derived kin evolved in fits and starts, a marriage more of convenience than of cunning and camouflage. Though many practitioners today see the saints as masks put on the faces of orishas, others see orisha and saint alike as manifestations of the divinity that underlies and infuses each.

100 Million?

Today descendants of these slaves continue to preserve and practice the ways of their forebears under a variety of (dis)guises, including Santeria (literally "the way of the saints," also known as Lukumi and La Regla De Ocha) in Cuba; Candomble, Umbanda, and Macumba in Brazil; the Orisha Movement (aka Shango) in Trinidad and Tobago; Kele in St. Lucia; and, to a lesser extent, Vodun in Haiti.[31] Many whites and Hispanics without any blood ties to Yorubaland also participate in these traditions, and orisha devotees, who were once almost entirely poor, can now be found among the

middle classes. What these traditions share is a marriage to Catholicism plus fidelity to core techniques of orisha devotion such as divination, spirit/body possession, and sacrifice. This marriage has lasted because of the striking similarities between Roman Catholicism and Yoruba religion. Both operate in a cosmos with a Supreme Being at the top, human beings at the bottom, and a host of specialized intermediaries in between facilitating communication and exchange across the divine/human divide. And while intellectuals in both speculate about the afterlife, each is heavily invested at the popular level in everyday life. It is not beneath the orishas (or the saints) to care about our toothaches, our children, our promotions, or our lovers.

Because there are no central organizations of any sort for Candomble, Santeria, or their kin, there are no official numbers for adherents to Yoruba-derived religious traditions in the diaspora. The Yoruba penchant for secrecy makes even unofficial numbers elusive, and the stigma that these traditions are "primitive" and even "Satanic" keeps many practitioners under cover. Further complicating matters (and challenging deeply ingrained notions of how religion is supposed to work) is the fact that New World orisha devotees do not feel the need to choose between an identity as a Catholic and an identity as a practitioner of Candomble or Umbanda or Macumba or Santeria.

And then there is that small matter of what exactly we are trying to count. Those who have undergone initiations and had an orisha placed in their ori? If so, the numbers are admittedly quite small. Or those who have gone to diviners on matters of health, work, and love? If so, the numbers are quite large. Joseph Murphy, a professor in Georgetown's Department of Theology, writes that he has "yet to meet a Cuban of any social class or racial category who has not at least once consulted (or, more circumspectly, 'been taken to consult') an *orisha* priest/ess about some problem."[32]

This distinction may help make sense of the huge gap between census numbers for orisha devotion in Brazil and estimates thrown around by scholars. Yoruba religious traditions are particularly

strong in Brazil, which saw the largest slave migrations of anywhere in the New World (about four million between the 1530s and the 1850s) and some of the largest ratios of slaves to free people. As the slave trade ended in the middle of the nineteenth century, slaves accounted for more than a third of Brazil's total population and enjoyed majorities in cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Salvador da Bahia. So orisha devotion in Brazil is "very pervasive"—"part of the popular culture, and the Brazilian way of life."[33]

Yet Brazil's 2000 census found only 128,000 people who self-identified as practitioners of Candomble and 397,000 who self-identified as practitioners of Umbanda.[34] How to reconcile these modest numbers with books that speak routinely of tens of millions of adherents *each* for Candomble and Umbanda? Perhaps the census figures reflect those who practice Afro-Brazilian traditions quite apart from any Catholic identity, while the more generous estimates account for people with multiple religious identities—those who, while still on the Catholic rolls, nonetheless attend orisha festivals, consult orisha diviners, and "make ebo" (sacrifice).

Happily, there is some good data about the institutional dimension of Candomble, which is the earliest, most resolutely African, and (census figures notwithstanding) most popular of the Yoruba-derived religions of Brazil. This data is particularly helpful in the northeastern state of Bahia, where orisha devotion is at least the equal of Catholic faith and probably its superior. Salvador da Bahia, this state's capital, has been called the "Black Rome" because of its Afro-Brazilian population and its Catholic piety. It is said that there are 365 churches in the city, one for every day of the year. Though this makes a good story, the figure is likely exaggerated. Either way, Candomble terreiros far outnumber Catholic churches. Statewide, total terreiros skyrocketed from 67 in the 1940s to 480 in the 1960s to 1854 in 1989.[35] Today there are well over two thousand, and not all of them of the storefront variety. In fact, some resemble evangelical megachurches. Ile Axe Opo Afonja, a terreiro founded in 1910 and run in the early twenty-first century by the charismatic Mãe Stella de Oxóssi,

includes "a school, a daycare center, craft workshops, a clinic, and a museum spread across a multi-acre campus."[36] It attracts not just the down-and-out often associated with Afro-Brazilian religions but also prominent and well-to-do leaders in politics, business, education, and the arts.

One hundred million is the most commonly printed estimate for Yoruba practitioners worldwide, but total adherents—people who seek help from the orishas in some manner—probably top out at eight figures rather than nine. If Olupona and Rey are right, there are 25 million adherents in West Africa, making Yoruba religion the most widely practiced religious tradition on that continent after Islam and Christianity. Brazil, whose total population was 187 million in 2009, is home to at least another 10 to 25 million; Cuba (population 11 million) is home to at least two or three million more; and the United States has a few hundred thousand. Even by these conservative estimates, there are more adherents to Yoruba religion than there are Jews, Sikhs, Jains, or Zoroastrians, placing this tradition, on numbers alone, securely among the world's top six religions.[37]

Yoruba religion is not only great in terms of numbers and geographic reach, however. It is also great in the sense of ancient and monumental. In ancient Africa, the Yoruba, who organized themselves in towns run by a ruler (*oba*) who also served as a religious head, were among the most urbanized of peoples. By the ninth century C.E., their sacred capital of Ile-Ife was a thriving metropolis, and over the next few centuries Yoruba artists were creating objects of beauty out of terracotta and bronze that, according to Thompson, were the wonder of the West. Yoruba culture suffered through the rise of modernity under a combination of internal and external pressures, including foreign missions, colonialism, and civil war. Yet the Yoruba remain, according to Thompson, "creators of one of the premier cultures of the world."[38] And, I would add, of one of its premier religions. Just as the Bible has inspired the art of Bach, El Greco, and Toni Morrison, stories of the orishas have for centuries moved the hands and hearts of dancers, singers, novelists, painters, and poets in West Africa and beyond, including

Morrison herself, whose 1998 novel *Paradise* features a Candomble priestess and a goddess reminiscent of the Candomble water orisha Yemanja (Yemoja in Yorubaland).

Mãe Stella, Oyotunji, and Africanization

Not everyone is happy with this diffusion of the Yoruba religious impulse across the New World, of course. Many evangelicals and Pentecostals denounce orisha devotion as witchcraft, sorcery, and demon worship. Many Catholic priests see Santeria and Candomble as bastardizations of the true faith. A lawyer who tried to shut down a Santeria center in Miami called Santeria "a cannibalistic, voodoo-like sect which attracts the worst elements of society."[39]

Some Yoruba practitioners themselves see Santeria and Candomble as bastardizations. But rather than trying to purify their tradition of African superstitions, they are trying to decatholicize it. Like the Puritans of seventeenth-century England and New England, these reformers are intent on divorcing themselves from Catholic influences. But rather than looking to the Bible and the early Christian movement for models, they seek to restore the pristine traditions of the ancient Yoruba kingdoms.

In Brazil, the popular and powerful Bahian priestess Mãe Stella has challenged all Candomble practitioners to take off the fig leaf of the Catholic saints and worship African orishas in the open, without apology, guilt, or fear. Catholicism is no longer required, and Candomble is no longer outlawed, Stella reasons, so "the saints should be dumped, like a mask after Carnaval."[40]

Another effort to take orisha devotion "back to Africa" is Oyotunji African Village, which aims to re-create what it imagines to be a precolonial Yoruba kingdom in the contemporary American South. Located near Sheldon in rural Beaufort County, South Carolina, Oyotunji (the name means "Oyo Rises Again") was founded in 1970, but its roots go back to New York and the 1950s. Its founder, His Royal Highness Efuntola Oseijeman Adelabu

Adefunmi (aka Walter King, 1928–2005), established the Order of Damballah Hwedo Ancestor Priests in 1956 and the Shango Temple (later renamed the Yoruba Temple) in 1959, both as refuges for African Americans interested in wearing African clothes, taking African names, and living an African lifestyle.

Adefunmi, who was raised on the teachings and institutions of the pioneering black nationalist Marcus Garvey, encountered various forms of African religion on trips he took as a young man to Egypt and Haiti. In 1959 in Cuba he was initiated into the Santeria priesthood of Obatala. But in keeping with his "back to Africa" commitments, his community aimed to purify itself of New World influences. To that end, Adefunmi was initiated into the Ifa priesthood in Nigeria in 1972. On a later trip to Nigeria he was coronated an oba in Ile-Ife in 1981. Despite efforts to strip Catholic (and Protestant) masks off New World Yoruba practice, many influences from Santeria remain at Oyotunji. However, life at this twenty-seven-acre community has diverted from Cuban practice on the gender front, where since the 1990s women had access to the Ifa priesthood, a responsibility out of reach for them in Havana and its environs.

Life at Oyotunji has proved financially and culturally difficult for many, and the population has fluctuated as a result. The number of residents likely peaked at two hundred or so in the early 1970s and stood at a few dozen in the first decade of the twenty-first century.[41] Village residents, who rely heavily on Ifa divination to pursue their individual and collective destinies, have been led since Adefunmi's death in 2005 by his son, now known as Oba Adefunmi II.

The Africanization efforts of Stella and the Adefunmis have prompted an intriguing debate. Flipping the script on those who would decatholicize Santeria, some *santeros* and *santeras* (as practitioners are called) believe that Yoruba religion is actually purer today in Cuba than it is in West Africa, given how thoroughly Islam has penetrated Yoruba culture in its homeland.

Desi Arnaz and DC Comics

Though most Europeans and Americans know almost nothing about this great religion, over the last generation or so Yoruba religious traditions have come increasingly to international attention. In the 1950s, Cuban-American actor and musician Desi Arnaz sang repeatedly to the Yoruba orisha Babaluaye on the sitcom *I Love Lucy*, and in the wake of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 hundreds of thousands of Cuban refugees, many of them Santeria practitioners, flooded into the United States. Beginning in the late 1960s, Nigerian Afrobeat musicians such as Fela Amkulapo Kuti and King Sunny Ade toured the West, creatively translating the Yoruba aesthetic into idioms that lovers of rock and pop could understand. The popular Brazilian film *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976) brought awareness of Candomble (the orishas come to the assistance of a grieving wife played by Sonia Braga) both to the Portuguese-speaking world and to millions who viewed it in subtitles in Europe and the United States. Black nationalism triggered a search for African roots buoyed by the Alex Haley book *Roots* (1976) and the twelve-hour television miniseries that followed. The Mariel boatlift of 1980, which brought over a hundred thousand Cubans to the United States, increased both the vitality and visibility of Santeria in the United States. A DC Comics series called Orishas debuted in 1990. Finally, a pathmaking U.S. Supreme Court case, *The Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* (1993), legitimated Santeria by ruling that efforts by local authorities in Hialeah, Florida, to outlaw animal sacrifice violated First Amendment guarantees of religious liberty. Since the 1990s, Yoruba religion has also taken to the World Wide Web, where sites such as Orishanet.org do what other religions do online—educate, aggregate, debate, and in some cases confuse. It is now possible to consult with a diviner through cyberspace.

For centuries Muslims and Christians have denounced Yoruba religion as superstition. In the 1970s and 1980s, this tradition was

further tarnished by a series of cult scares, epitomized by the 1987 Hollywood thriller *The Believers*, which equated Santeria with human sacrifice. More recently, a *Newsweek* story called Santeria practitioners "poultricidal zealots."[42] But this is an ancient religious tradition, nearly as old as Islam, which offers a profound diagnosis of the human problem, a practical solution, and a series of techniques (divination, sacrifice, and spirit/body possession) to reach its goal. Though it puts more truck in the oral than the written ("bookish" is pejorative here), Yoruba religion boasts a vast and sophisticated corpus of sacred stories, historical accounts, morality tales, poems, and proverbs that remind us of our individual and shared destinies, and promise to connect us with one another, with creation, and with the divine.

It should be noted that, while Yoruba culture is ancient, Yoruba identity is modern. Like the term *Hinduism*, which was a by-product of the arrival of the British in India, the term *Yoruba* is relatively recent, dating only to the early nineteenth century.[43] Before that time, Yoruba peoples identified not as Yoruba but with particular city-states or royal lineages, just as Hindus before the British identified not as Hindu but as speakers of particular languages, residents of particular regions, and worshippers of particular gods. While initially used by outsiders to refer to "Yoruba country" or "the Yoruba people," this term was eventually taken on as a badge of honor by the Yoruba themselves, first in the New World and then in West Africa, as former slaves began in the last half of the nineteenth century to return to their homelands with allegiances to a new, pan-Yoruba religion and culture rather than to particular city-states and royal lineages.

Elasticity

Like Hinduism, Yoruba religion rests on practice more than faith. In Yoruba the word *believer* (*igbagbo*) points to a Christian.[44] That is because Yoruba religion, more than a rigid belief system, is a

pragmatic way of life. Practitioners care far more about telling good stories and performing effective rituals than about thinking right thoughts. They greet religion's doctrinal dimension with indifference and demonstrate almost no interest in patrolling orthodoxy, or even in defining its borders. This is a tradition of stories, their interpretation, and their application in rituals and in everyday life—a "religion of the hand" rather than the head, in the words of a Candomble priestess from Brazil.[45]

Again like Hinduism, Yoruba religion is almost endlessly elastic, greeting foreign religious impulses with a yes rather than a no, adopting, adapting, and absorbing these impulses and reinventing itself along the way. As Christianity came to Yorubaland in the 1840s, and Islam centuries earlier, Yoruba religious traditions mixed with both. And as these reinvented Yoruba traditions sailed across the Atlantic to the Americas, practitioners reinvented them again, picking up not only Catholic influences but also the influences of religions indigenous to the Americas.

Soyinka describes this "accommodative spirit of the Yorùbá gods" as an "eternal bequest to a world that is riven by the spirit of intolerance, of xenophobia and suspicion."[46] Though in possession of a massive, multigenre oral corpus of sacred literature, Yoruba practitioners have resisted freezing it into dogma or revelation. Perhaps that is because this corpus consists largely of stories rather than Western-style theological argumentation. Or perhaps this corpus is as narrative and nondoctrinaire as it is because Yoruba practitioners couldn't be bothered to memorize dry theology. For whatever reason, the Yoruba exhibit the same flexibility in adapting their religious practices to new places and times that they exhibit in approaching their oral texts, which include—alongside the all-important divination poems—praise songs, prayers, proverbs, myths, incantations, folktales, and recipes for herbal remedies. "*Ifa*'s abiding virtue," writes Soyinka, is "the perpetual elasticity of knowledge."[47]

The Yoruba see the complex realities of the cosmos not as revealed from on high once and for all but as forever coming into

sight through an equally complex dance between humans and orishas. As a result, Yoruba practitioners are able to see these orishas as exemplars who abide inside the difficulties of human existence rather than lording over and above them, and to see their sacred texts "as no more than signposts, as parables that may lead the mind toward deeper quarrying into the human condition, its contradictions and bouts of illumination."[48]

Perhaps because it recognizes the contradictions and complications of life on earth, Yoruba religion does not evangelize or anathematize. It has no pope, and its leaders have never gathered to squeeze Yoruba beliefs into a creed. "No excommunication is pronounced," Soyinka writes, "a *fatwa* is unheard of."[49]

Given all this freedom, what is shared across the elusive and elastic manifestations of Yoruba religion? In a word, practice. From Nigeria to New York, orisha devotees are practitioners more than believers. Their practice consists of various techniques for communication and exchange between human beings and orishas. These techniques aim at connection—narrowing the gap between the earthly and heavenly realms by calling on a series of mediators. The head of a family mediates between that family and its ancestors. The chief of a town or city mediates between the townspeople and the orishas. The orishas mediate between human beings and Olodumare. The babalawo mediates between a client and the orishas. And Eshu mediates between human beings and the orishas.

Most succinctly, Yoruba religion sees the human problem as disconnection. To be human is to be connected, but all too often we are disconnected from one another, from nature, from the orishas, and from the High God Olodumare. We are even disconnected from our destinies, alienated from our truest selves. Yoruba practices seek to reconnect us across all these divides.

An African American sculptor named Lonnie Holley once lived in a modest home bumping up against the airport in Birmingham, Alabama, and throughout his property—on the ground, inside abandoned cars, and up in trees—he connected found-object sculptures with one another via a crazy patchwork of string, rope,

fishing line, and telephone cords that turned the entire landscape and everything in it into one interconnected and awe-inspiring piece of art. Yoruba religion also testifies profoundly to the power of connectivity. To our seemingly insatiable capacity to pretend that we are somehow independent atoms, Yoruba religion responds that human beings are connected to the divine, to animals, to plants, to inanimate objects, and to other human beings (both dead and alive).

As Christian missionaries flooded into West Africa in the nineteenth century, they taunted the Yoruba by insisting that "the dead do not speak."[50] This idea that society is for the living is entirely foreign to China, where the dead are very much alive—enshrined in ancestral tablets in the home and consulted on all sorts of important matters of business and the heart. But it is just as foreign to Yoruba culture, where the quick and the dead are connected through all sorts of stories and rituals.

It is difficult to summarize the key practices of any religion, particularly one as elastic as orisha devotion. But this task is even more difficult because of the penchant of Yoruba practitioners for secrecy. The key religious elite in this tradition in West Africa is the guardian of secrets, the babalawo. And, as Yoruba religion migrated to the New World, secrecy became only more important. Slaves were often prohibited from practicing African religions, so those committed to walking in the ways of their ancestors had no choice other than to sacrifice on the sly. Even today New World practitioners of Yoruba religions unveil their esoteric truths through a series of ascending initiations. Adherents play a game of reveal and conceal as seductive as *eros* itself, flirting with boundaries, resisting closure, and otherwise frustrating the desires of anyone wishing to package up its treasures in paper and bow.

While it is impossible to know everything that goes on inside a Candomble terreiro or Santeria casa, it is possible to generalize about the techniques Yoruba practitioners use to reconnect themselves with other human beings, with their ancestors, with the orishas, with their own destinies, and with the natural world. These

techniques include initiation, when you receive an orisha into your ori and in the process take on his or her ashe. But the most foundational practices in this "religion of the hand" are divination and spirit/body possession.

Ifa Divination

Ifa divination, which has been compared to China's Yijing (I Ching), is a consultation between a devotee and the orisha of wisdom and destiny Orunmila (aka Ifa). Orunmila is consulted via Ifa divination on important occasions such as births, marriages, and deaths, and whenever an orisha devotee is struggling with a conflict he or she wants to see resolved. Nothing like eternal salvation is at issue here. Yoruba practitioners do speak of a "good heaven" (*orun rere*) and a "bad heaven" (*orun apadi*). They also hope for reincarnation, which in this tradition is a good thing. (Cruel people and suicides are not reborn.) But the focus, as with Israelite religion, seems to be living long and well on earth rather than attaining immortality elsewhere. The presenting problems in Ifa divination are unapologetically thisworldly: sickness or lovesickness, bad fortune or bad blood. A daughter may be performing poorly in school. A grandfather may be dying. A mother may have trouble finding a job. It is also possible for entire communities to consult with babalawos, particularly in times of crisis. If the United States were a Yoruba nation, its leaders would have gone to Orunmila about the financial meltdown of 2008. From the Yoruba perspective, no difficulty is entirely secular. Each has its origin in an orisha who has been neglected, or perhaps in a witch or sorcerer, so each can be addressed by spiritual means.

Ifa divination begins literally in the hand, with a babalawo (or iyalawo) holding sixteen palm nuts or a divining chain vibrating with the power of ashe. The divining chain is quicker and more portable than the traditional palm nut method, and, for some, it doesn't carry the power or authority of the original. In the original technique, the babalawo holds the palm nuts up to the ori of the client. He then shakes these nuts randomly from hand to hand until either one or two is remaining in the left. He does this sixteen times, in each case noting the results in the sand of his divining tray. He then repeats it another sixteen times, which enables him to arrive at one *odu* (signature) out of 256 (16 x 16) possible combinations. At this point, the babalawo, who has gone through rigorous multiyear training that includes memorizing in excess of a thousand Ifa poems, recites at least four stories for this odu, beginning with "Ifa says." The client decides which of these poems best fits his situation. The babalawo goes on to chant all the verses he knows for that story—the actions of the orishas, the consequences of those actions. The client then tries his best to apply these verses to his circumstances.

The consultation ends with a recommendation of a sacrifice of some sort. Generosity is a key virtue—the epitome of "cool"—in Yoruba culture, and to sacrifice is to show generosity to the orishas. Any given sacrifice is offered to a particular orisha, but a portion goes first to Eshu, who can be entrusted to deliver it only if he is cut in on the action from the start. Sometimes this offering is a blood sacrifice—a chicken, for example, which in almost all cases is then cooked and eaten. And animal blood is believed in this tradition to be particularly rich in ashe. But "making ebo" can also take the form of an act of charity or renunciation. Often what is sacrificed is a fruit or vegetable, or a drink of some sort. Yemoja, for example, enjoys duck, but she is also quite happy with watermelon. So like Yoruba religion writ large, Ifa divination is reciprocal. It begins with the orishas offering words of wisdom to a practitioner and ends with this practitioner offering a gift of some sort to the orishas: "May the offerings be carried, may the offerings be accepted," says the babalawo in salutation, "may the offerings bring about change."[51]

In the New World, Ifa continues to be practiced, but its nuances and complexities have given way in many locales to simpler and blunter oracular techniques. Priestesses are also fully integrated

into the divining ranks. In fact, the majority of the two thousand-plus Candomble terreiros in Bahia are run by women. Purists (and even elastic Yoruba religion has a few) deride these innovations as unwarranted, and the simpler techniques as baby stuff. But even in the New World divination continues to be regarded as the "essence of Yoruba philosophy and worship."[52]

Spirit (and Body) Possession

All religions make use of a wide variety of the senses, shaping the body in this direction or that for the purposes of prayer or penitence. It isn't just that we learn things through our bodies (though of course we do) but that we become and remain Muslims by prostrating in prayer, or Zen Buddhists by sitting in meditation. The Yoruba are particularly adept at putting religion in motion, however. Here spirit and matter dance cheek to cheek. Wisdom is embodied. There is no disembodied self that thinks beyond the confines of bone and breath. In traditional Catholicism, the saint is satisfied with the prayers of the faithful and an occasional candle lit in his name. But in Candomble and Santeria words and intentions are not enough; the orishas must eat and drink. So it should not be surprising that drumming and dance are religious practices. In this tradition, orishas enter into human life by possessing human bodies.

The orishas are associated with particular parts of the body, and therefore with particular illnesses. So it is possible in this tradition to trace illnesses not only to certain organs but also to the orishas who have afflicted those organs and therefore have the power to make them well. If you have come down with herpes in Cuba, it is likely Oshun who has stricken you. But the body is variously mapped across the Yoruba world. In Cuba, the warrior Ogun is associated with the legs, fiery Chango with the penis, and Elegba (aka Eshu) with the feet. In Brazil, Xango (aka Shango) is located in the chest, and whereas Ogun does get the left leg, the right leg

(and the penis) belong to Exu (the Brazilian analog to Eshu and Elegba).[53]

But the orishas are also recognizable in drumming patterns (slow for ancient Orunmila, fast for fiery Ogun) and dancing steps—Shango's kicks, leaps, high steps, and tumbles; Obatala's slow, cool walking; Babaluaye's erratic jerking (low and cramped, like a sick man). In fact, dance is so central to this religious tradition that some have referred to it as a "dancing religion." Some orishas never possess anyone. For example, Orunmila comes to earth solely through divination. But Ogun, god of war, dances in the sharp steps and aggressive postures of a warrior, his hands slicing the air on a sharp diagonal like a sword. Ochoosi the hunter pulls an arrow from his imaginary quiver, places it in his imaginary bow, and "reacts in a jerking undulation" from the force of the arrow's release. Shango "pulls energy from the skies toward his genitals," playing with his crotch, Michael Jackson–style. Oshun's movements are more lyrical and less staccato, flowing like the river she represents, sensuous and potent as sex itself.[54]

Yoruba trance dancing is often referred to as spirit possession, but that is not quite right, since the orisha possess both the body and the spirit of the devotee. Every word, gesture, and movement of someone who has "made the god" manifests the possessor rather than the possessed. Wande Abimbola has suggested that the appropriate metaphor here is to "climb," since most orishas (Shango is a notable exception) live inside the earth and come up through the ground to enter those they possess (feet and lower legs first).[55] The possessed also speak of being caught or grabbed. The most common analogy, however, is to a rider "mounting" a horse—an image that carries with it sexual connotations of a dominant male "mounting" a submissive female. In festivals and initiation rites the orishas "mount" and then "ride" devotees, possessing their bodies in dance and their spirits in trance.

There is a vibrant debate about how much (if at all) gender mattered in traditional Yoruba religion, but there is no debating how slippery and permeable the categories of male and female are for

Yoruba practitioners today.[56] While worshipping the orishas of their towns, the rulers of Idanre and nearby Owo cross-dress as women. In a festival to the goddess Oronsen, crowds praise their king as Oronsen's husband Olowo. Pointing to his fat belly, they also praise him for being pregnant—"the prolific banana tree which bears much fruit."[57] On feast days, men can dance as female orishas, and women can dance as male orishas. But even this distinction between "female" and "male" orishas is problematic, since the macho Shango is revered in Cuba as Saint Barbara, the goddess Oya is said to have been male at some point in the past, and the relatively obscure Brazilian orisha Logunede is said to spend half the year as a male hunter in the forest and the other half as a female enchantress in the river. It is also common for practitioners to switch genders when they reincarnate. Many Yoruba girls are called Babatunde ("Father Returns"), and many Yoruba boys are called Yetunde ("Mother Returns). Orishas also switch genders as they move from place to place. Like Buddhism's bodhisattva of compassion, who is male in India as Avalokiteshvara and female in East Asia as Guanyin, Oduduwa (aka Odua and Odudua), the divine progenitor of all Yoruba kings, takes female form in northeastern Yorubaland and male form in its southwestern cities and towns. Perhaps because of this gender flexibility, many straight men in Brazil and Cuba refuse to become possession priests. They see being "mounted" as akin to playing the submissive role in a sexual encounter, so the possession priesthood in these countries is often filled by women and gay men.

New World Transformations

Many more changes came over Yoruba religion as it migrated to the New World. But these changes were only possible because the Yoruba religious impulse survived. One key to this survival is elasticity. If Yoruba religion had not bent under the unimaginable pressures of capture, passage, slavery, and emancipation, it would

undoubtedly have broken to pieces. But another source of the success of Yoruba religion is orality.

Judaism was born when Jews began to shift their sights, after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 B.C.E., from temple rituals to textual interpretations. This historic transformation didn't just make Judaism as we know it, it made Judaism more mobile. Whereas temple rituals could only be performed by priests at the Jerusalem Temple, the Hebrew Bible could be interpreted anywhere by anyone who could read. Yoruba religion is similarly transportable and its authority similarly decentralized. In this case, however, authority lies in the oral corpus of Ifa divination rather than in the written text of the Hebrew Bible. "Book knowledge," writes UNESCO leader and Yoruba Studies professor Olabiyi Babalola Yai, "is devoid of àṣẹ."[58] So Yoruba religion was able to travel, first, inside West Africa and, later, across the oceans in the heads of diviners and the feet and hips of the god-possessed.

Some of the changes that came over Yoruba religion in the New World have already been mentioned. The orishas were whittled down from hundreds or thousands to dozens, and Ifa has largely (though not entirely) given way to simpler forms of divination. But there are other important differences between traditional Yoruba religion and the Yoruba-derived traditions of the Americas. Many orishas lost their associations with particular places and peoples in West Africa after they migrated to the New World. In West Africa only a chosen few, such as Ogun, Eshu, and Obatala, were truly pan-Yoruba deities. In the New World, however, almost all orishas serve devotees regardless of location. Some relatively unimportant West African orishas were promoted after transatlantic passage. The bow-and-arrow hunter Ochoosi is little known in his homeland but quite popular in Brazil, where in the Rio region he is identified with Saint Sebastian, whose iconography depicts him as shot full of arrows. Meanwhile, many orishas died in the Middle Passage, and many others withered away as slavery wore on. Agricultural orishas largely fell away in urbanized Brazil, though they continued to live and breathe (and eat) in Haiti. Another victim

of the transatlantic passage was ancestor worship. Slavery so thoroughly destroyed extended family networks that traditional ancestor devotion became next to impossible.

Another important transformation was the emergence of houses of worship for all orishas. One key difference between Indian and American Hinduism is that in India temples typically house just one god, whereas in the United States temples typically house many. Something similar happened as Yoruba religion crossed the Atlantic. In West Africa, shrines were typically associated with one particular orisha, who was in turn associated with one region or dynastic line. But in the New World, where resources were scarcer and devotees more widely scattered, Brazilian terreiros and Cuban casas typically housed all the orishas, or at least all the orishas with enough ashe to be remembered.

These and other efforts to preserve Yoruba religion by changing it can and should be seen as transformations. But in these transformations there is continuity too. Yoruba culture has traditionally been both elastic and accommodating. While Christians have long concerned themselves with keeping their faith pure by inoculating their doctrines against impurity, the Yoruba tradition has been happily mixing with "outside" influences for millennia. So the so-called syncretism of the New World was, and is, just more of the same.

Flourishing

There is an intriguing debate about the niche religion occupies in human psychology and society. Is religion's primary purpose to ward off the chill of death? Many believe this is the case—that religions rise and fall largely on how well they address the problem of mortality. But perhaps death and the afterlife are largely male concerns. After all, it is men who have done most of the killing in human history. Might it be that religion's primary purpose is to make sense not of death but of birth, not of destruction but of

creation? After all, the Jewish and Christian Bibles begin not with the deaths of Abraham or Jesus but with the creation of the world. Perhaps where religions really compete is on the question of how to flourish.[59]

In this debate, Yoruba religion comes down squarely on the side of human flourishing. There is discussion, of course, about reincarnation and about a good and a bad heaven. But the goal is not to be reborn or occupy some otherworldly paradise but to flourish here and now. Today Yoruba religion in both Africa and the Americas attempts to repair our lives and our world by reconnecting earth and heaven, human beings and orishas, and each of us with our own particular destinies and natural environments. This world can never be a paradise, because conflict is endemic to the human condition. Gods and "antigods" are forever at war, and we humans seem forever to be forgetting our destinies. But happily we can consult the orishas through divination, call them to our sides through sacrifice, and dance with them in our own bodies. Such resolutions of our conflicts are temporary, to be sure, and must be repeated. But with proper devotion to the orishas, say the Yoruba, we, our children, and our grandchildren can live long, healthy, wise, and prosperous lives.