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The River That Crosses an Ocean: Ifa/Orisha in the Global Spiritual Marketplace

Abstract Ifa/Orisha, the traditional spiritual practice of the Yoruba nation, has entered the global spiritual marketplace. With thousands of worshipers on both sides of the Atlantic, practitioners and participants are engaging new arenas of discourse. In southwest Nigeria, storytellers are expressing the living religion through narratives that are relevant, adaptable, and meaningful in a plurality of contexts. From the often antagonistic relationship between Ifa/Orisha and the Abrahamic faiths, to the challenges posed by modernity and globalization, practitioners are renegotiating the identity of their religion in social and philosophical ways. Interpreting data gathered from interviews conducted in Nigeria and the United States, I present a qualitative analysis of how practitioners, participants, and non-practitioners interact with the fundamental premises underlying the matrix of symbols, rites, and narratives that represent traditional Yoruba religion.

Keywords Ifa; Orisha; Yoruba; Ogun; Osun; Nigeria; African Religion and Spirituality

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“I was not the first oyinbo (white man) interested in learning more about the spiritual practices of the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria. My first challenge was to penetrate a layered and complex matrix of social responses designed to protect and maintain the integrity of an indigenous esoteric tradition. It is not uncommon for practitioners of Ifa and Orisha to mislead foreigners, taking advantage of a new paradigm of spiritual tourism between the West and developing countries around the world.1

On account of its popularity in the Diaspora, particularly in Cuba and Brazil, as well as in the United States, the Yoruba spiritual tradition and pantheon attracts a good deal of attention. While spiritual tourism is not as prevalent in Nigeria as it is in Peru or Thailand, the annual Osun Festival in Oshogbo draws hundreds of visitors from around the world.2 While many visitors are familiar with Ifa and Orisha, there are many different practices, interpretations, and representations.

A comprehensive and comparative survey of the various traditions that incorporate and employ elements of West African Ifa/Orisha would be lengthy indeed. Suffice it to say that worshippers in Cuba are not identical in their practice to worshippers in New York, and neither are identical in their practices to worshippers in southwest Nigeria. Nonetheless, the Orishas are considered to be the same spirits regardless of whether they are invoked in Yoruba, Creole, Spanish, Portuguese, or English. It is possible to ascribe the transnational character of Yoruba religion to the historical circumstances surrounding its proliferation. Its currently international identity, however, suggests that Ifa/Orisha is meaningful and relevant to a broad spectrum of participants. This is remarkable for an indigenous religious tradition, in part because Ifa/Orisha is closely tied to the Orishas and the rites meant to elicit their protection and aid, or to prevent them from harming an individual or group. Ifa/Orisha is polytheistic, worldly, often uninhibited, unpredictable, and radically diverse. It emphasizes difference and plurality, maintaining integrity both esoterically and exoterically through carefully moderated relationships between practitioners and participants.

1 Peter Probst series (2004:34-35): “[w]hat has taken place is the transformation of a formerly ‘local’ festival into a ‘global’ event, with nowadays numerous entries on the Internet, and attended by visitors from all over the world...many of the tourists attending...are members of the African Diaspora in Europe, the U.S., the Caribbean, and South America, who come to Nigeria either to find or to revitalize their ethnic identity.”
I was curious to learn how Nigerian practitioners and participants acknowledge the global character of *Ija/Orisha*. Do they engage the religion as a root system of local or regional origin; or as an inclusive system able to assimilate religious and magical elements from practices external to Nigeria? I would, of course, let the respondents speak for themselves. Many of them were, after all, the representatives and storytellers of a tradition that originated in their homeland.

I conducted interviews with over forty respondents.3 Interviews were conducted in a number of locations throughout southwest Nigeria, including Ile-Ife, Osogbo, and Ibadan; as well as in Yola-Jimeta, Adamawa State. I arranged inter-views including Ilé-Ife, Oshogbo, and Ibadan; as well as a meeting with two priests and an apprentice tasked with assessing several individuals, including a meeting with a local king and his royal *Ija* priest.4

Understandably, practitioner engagements were varied. A pattern did emerge, however: practitioners who lived in larger urban centers were more familiar with external interpretations, as well as foreign practitioners and initiates. Consequently, they were either prepared to, or proficient in, adapting their explanations to accommodate multiple perspectives and interpretations. In doing so, they perform a complex narrative function: they draw from disparate frames (i.e., local, tribal, and global), incorporating different interpretations of the Orishas, ritual objects, and mythology, different mediums of representation (music, art, performance), and interrelate these frames, interpretations, and representations into a sacred space created in the moment to suit a specific, worldly purpose. At the same time, they draw from specific, lineage-based stocks of knowledge anchored in familiar, socially reinforced conventions that satisfy a real need for a meaningful and effectual exchange between practitioner and participant(s). In contrast, practitioners outside of larger urban centers were more likely to rely solely on lineage-based, directly transmitted forms. Unfortunately, for local practitioners who do not have access to, proficiency in, or an interest in engaging foreign imports of *Ija/Orisha*, they are faced with a diminishing matrix of local interest and investment. Young men and women from the villages are seeking their fortunes in the rapidly growing cities throughout Nigeria, encountering highly aggressive congregations of Christians and Muslims, as well as a marked emphasis in modernity, industrialization, and globalization. The religious systems of the largely uneducated elders do not hold so strongly, and are eroded steadily. Diminished forms may exist, even those that may have been distorted by the pressures of social change.

Practitioners of *Ija/Orisha*, as well as participants (clients, witnesses, etc.) enact the roles of storyteller: clients petition the priests with the troubles of their daily lives, opening connections into multiple arenas of human engagement. The priest (*babalawo*) surrounds, or encases the exchange in sacred space, ensuring that a very specific meaning (or range of meanings) is assigned to the actions, words, and objective of the consultation. Stories are told that serve as invocations (rites of summoning), reference-points (applying the principle of sympathetic magic),

5 On this particular occasion, I was interested in learning more about local rural practice outside of Ilé-Ife, specifically related to the Orisha Eshu, an often volatile and unpredictable spirit. Fortuitously, my sponsor’s father was from a complex family history related to Yoruba religion; belief and relationship to the symbols and concepts of *Ija/Orisha*; knowledge of related variations of African spirituality. Many interviews were spontaneous and unstructured, serendipitous occasions of right time and place—including a meeting with a local king and his royal *Ija* priest.

6 Marcel Maus (2001:69) writes: “*Amongst* mythical spells, our type of incantation which describes a situation similar to that which the magician is trying to produce. The description usually involves a fairy story or an epic tale, with heroic or divine characters…the reason behind it being something like this: if a certain person (a god, saint, or hero) was able to do such and such a thing (usually a very difficult task) in such and such a circumstance, perhaps he could perform the same feat in the present case.” Maus’s definition is applicable here.

7 In his analysis of ritual conduct, Émile Durkheim (1995) identifies two aspects to every cult: negative and positive. In short, the negative cult is associated with prohibition and taboo, and the positive cult with sacrifice: “[a]s long as men feel there is something outside themselves that is reborn, forces that are reanimated, and a life that reawakens, they are not subdued” (Durkheim 1995:352-333). The data substantiating this article is based on interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013 with practitioners (a priest and priestess of Osun, an Obatala priest, and two priests of *Ija*) and non-practitioners (Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo Nigerians, as well as Westerners). The analytical method described by Barnes (1997) is particularly useful for examining a number of concepts, including root metaphor, emphatic symbol, root paradigm, and archetyp.
It may also be helpful to make reference here to the ethnographic model proposed by Robert Prus (1997:37): “the interactionist approach or paradigm attends centrally to the study of human lived experience as the paramount reality...the most feasible way of learning about human lived experience is through interactive inquiry into human life-worlds.” Ifa/Orisha, though active in countless different life-worlds on both sides of the Atlantic, is nevertheless strongly tied to its roots in West Africa. Its cohesion and adaptability is strengthened by the relevance and meaning ascribed to the social and private role of the religion by practitioners and non-practitioners alike.

I am not unaware that morphologies of religion have been imposed on accounts and studies of African traditions. James L. Cox (2001:351) rightly points out in a criticism of McKenzie’s Hail Orisha! that “phenomenological typologies, understood as essential characteristics of religion, fail to acknowledge the historical, social, and cultural contexts out of which they developed. Typologies only make sense as pragmatic, limited terms to help facilitate communication and promote understanding.” Cox’s point is not dissimilar to Emile Durkheim’s position (1995:91): “social facts exist in relationship with the social system to which they belong; hence they cannot be understood apart from it. This is why two facts belonging to two different societies cannot be fruitfully compared simply because they resemble one another.” Ifa/Orisha is far removed from the totemic religions posited by Durkheim as the most basic and universal form of religious belief and practice. However, different varieties of practice exist concurrently that appear to retain elements of varying stages in the development of the religion. Granted, many of these expressions are the result of factors that affect uprooted and transposed native traditions.

It should be noted that, at this time in history, the primarily oral traditions of Yoruba spirituality have been considerably influenced by tension, syncretism, and globalization, rendering any attempt to reconstruct an original Ifa/Orisha model all but impossible. The same adaptability that allows the tradition and its components to survive in so many different forms also precludes a definitive version, while allowing a plurality of narratives to exist in the same arena. There are many

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For example, one respondent referred to guns in a retelling of Ogun’s origins and initial interactions with human-kind. Obviously, guns were introduced to West Africa well after the Iron Age, considered by most scholars to coincide with the widespread generation of Ogun cults throughout the region. When I pointed this out to my respondent, he could only tell me that “most of the old, old stories have been forgotten or lost. Sometimes, they are the same, except we say ‘machetes’ instead of ‘guns’” (personal communication, May 2012).

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personal goals. Symbolic relations, natural phenom- ena, circumstantial events, and a range of both in- dividual and human experiences are linked to the involvement of the Orishas and lesser spirits, ancestors, and unnamed natural entities that act and react through interconnected human worlds. Participants in these worlds carefully negotiate personal and col- lective interpretations to maintain the chain of mean- ings that correlate tangible experiences to spiritual or supernatural origins. In many respondents, this attribution was clearly automatic. Higher degrees of involvement correspondently featured a tendency to ascribe spiritual causes to daily events (encountering a particular individual or acquaintance, the arising of opportunity or obstacle, etc.). In many cases, these interpretations are quite clever. In one case, the purchase of a shoddy used car that broke down at a very inconvenient time (on the road from Okene to Ile-Ife) was ascribed to the trickery of Esu working alongside Oggun—one a spirit of mischief and misfortune, the other a spirit of iron and industry (personal communication, May 2012).

Ife/Orisha occupies a range of positions in many lives around the world. For some, it represents a central focus; as priests or active practitioners, they may identify their social roles as representatives of certain lineages associated with specific temples, sites, and deities; or in terms of their social roles as the commu- nity’s consultants, healers, and protectors. For others, it is marginal, liminal, shrouded in sensationalized superstition. There are many points of interaction, and Ifa/Orisha is constantly reenvisioned into a radically changing landscape. Storytellers are challenged to preserve the essence of the system while maintaining their own roles as narrative agents. The substance of the belief system must be refreshed within competing life-worlds that are both culturally internal, and as far afield from their historical source as the metropoles of the New World. The balance between multiple expressions and a socially constructed, indepen- dent unity of interwoven narratives is a fine one, and difficult to maintain.

The major Orishas are well-known and can be found under a variety of names in sources ranging from scholarly articles to mass-market New Age catalogues of deities and spirits. In South America, they are most commonly syncretized with Catholic saints for a variety of reasons, but such confluations are misleading to outsiders and non-practitioners. This is often intentional, as Sheila S. Walker (1980:32) writes: “[w]hereas some people did indeed become Catholic, many managed to remain faithful to their ancestral religion, while avoiding persecution by superficially catholicizing their deities, a practice to which Catholicism lends itself well.”

In Nigeria, this type of syncretism is less common than in the Diaspora. Evangelical Christianity does not emphasize the reverence of saints or intermedi- aries; nor does the Yoruba concept of distant Oludumare accord with the Protestant vision of a personal relationship with God. Indeed, many of the Yoruba Orishas are earthbound spirits. Islam, of course, maintains a distinctly antagonistic stance towards idolatry. Still, there are many adherents of Yoruba spirituality who identify as Christian or Muslim, and it is not unknown for an individual belonging to another religion to consult a babalawo. In fact, many practitioners in Nigeria and in the Americas hold two faiths, freely blending symbolic and ritual elements in an endless variety of ways.

While most, if not all, ethnic groups practiced tra- ditional/indigenous religion and medicine at one time, the spread of Christianity in the South along the coast and Islam in the North across the Sahel greatly diminished the number of active practi- tioners and limited the application of juju19 to herbs, charms, and talismans, typically used to ward off danger or encourage success. Even these remnants of a more widespread array of practices are eroding, succumbing to a vigorous campaign of proselytizing by orthodox or fundamental expressions of the two major religions.20

The situation is not the same across the Atlan- tic. Yoruba spiritual traditions are quite healthy throughout South America, as well as in large ur- ban centers across the U.S., and they continue to gain followers from all walks of life. Many commu- nities that practice these traditions are in contact with their counterparts in West Africa,21 and the movement of ideas, styles, and symbols has adopt- ed a new pattern of transatlantic exchange. Enjoy- ing the patronage of scholars, affluent worshipers, and large sectors of urban populations throughout the Caribbean and Americas, as well as a vigorous dynamic of syncretism and diffusion, Yoruba tradi- tions are now returning to their homelands invigo- rated by a variety of spiritual globalization.

The Ifa Corpus is an oral one, and it is only relatively recently that the verses associated with the 256 Odu (spirits of divination) have been transcribed (see: Bascom 1969; 1980; Abimbola 1976; 1977; Ele- buruon 1989; 1998; 2004; Fama 1994). Moreover, while the structure of an Odu sequence is uniform, individual practitioners are free to express and inter- pret the verses in their own ways, authorized to do so in accordance with the lineage of their in- struction and practice. Amherd (2010:40) writes: “[b]ecause attention and privilege is given to the performance’s function in a given context together with its intertextual liability, static repetition is nei- ther sought nor valued. Instead, pleasure and rel- evance are found in ongoing emergent utterances that make use of orature materials appropriate to the function at hand.” No two recitations are going to be exactly alike. During the consultation, the peti- tioner and practitioner become actors in a sacred

17 Prus (1997:59) writes: “Ifa cultures may be most notably defined by activities, but the life-worlds that develop around these activities are also characterized by sets of perspectives, identities, relationships, commitments, emotional expressions, and linguistic influences.”

18 Interestingly, however, a type of African spirituality-Protes- tant syncretism does exist, according to Walker (1980). She cites Mitchell (1975) in saying that: “[b]eing filled with the Holy Spirit resembles possession by the Loa in the Vodou religion, and a kind of Protestant-Vodou syncretism exists.” (Walker 1980:34).

19 This term is commonly employed by Nigerians; howev- er, it should be noted that juju refers predominantly to talis- mans, amulets, and charms, and is associated with witchcraft. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word itself is likely a borrowing from the French jovou, “to” Yoruba div- ination and spirituality, although often grouped alongside witchcraft by outsiders, is another matter entirely.

20 Probst (2004:37) writes: “[h]ough the victory over Fulani did not stop the expansion of Islam, Osun was able to maintain its integrative function. With the advent of Christianity, howev- er, the situation changed… the missionaries made it clear that there is no alternative to the gospel. Combined with the effects of an increasing dominance of British colonial rule, their ef- forts turned out to be successful, and in the early 1950s, rough- ly a hundred years after the Fulani war, the mission forced the king to give up his office as the chief priest of the Osun cult.”

21 Including the Oyo Tunji settlement in Shelton, South Carolina, a neo-Yoruba community dedicated to the traditional worship of the Orishas. Oyo Tunji, according to Walker (1980:36), can be translated as “Oyo Rises Again/is Reborn.” Oyo was the once-capital of the West African empire of the same name.
space exceptional to that context and situation. While the methods of creating this space are conventional and reproducible, there are many factors that converge to facilitate an interaction that is consecrated, unique, and immediately relevant.

Robert Prus (1997:69) writes: “While the existence of a generally shared language enables the development of any particular subculture, it is important to acknowledge that each set of activities in which people engage represents a realm around which extensions or variants of that linguistic base may be developed.” In this case, the language is the matrix of symbols, ideas, and mythological narratives that comprise shared interpretations of Ifa/Orisha, unique to highly diverse cultural, social, and geographic settings. Each engagement works within and from this matrix, but participants are both licensed and encouraged to formulate additional meanings and contextualized interpretations within sacred space.

Naturally, beyond these realms of engagement, outside consecrated space, the system is immediately subject to the imaginative retooling of profane discourse. Different storytellers can choose to address issues or interpretations that may affect their practice or engagement with Ifa/Orisha. On the other hand, collective acceptance of new interpretations or representations depends on a complex process of mutual negotiations that are validated through symbolic reinforcement, appraisals of intention and authority, and consensus. My own interest in learning more about Ifa/Orisha was very carefully evaluated by sponsors and contacts in Yorubaland. Following several divination rites intended to elicit the consent of the Orishas, I awaited the decision of several practitioners in the community as to whether or not I would be admitted into their confidence. I am fortunate that the Orishas looked favorably on my petition, and as well that my intentions were deemed sufficiently genuine by those who are regarded as the guardians of a precious cultural heritage.

Perspectives and Engagements

It may be helpful to begin this part of the analysis from “outside” the practice. Prus (1997:73) writes: “[t]he objectification process also becomes intensified when outsiders (intentionally or otherwise) engage in ‘identity work’ pertaining to...interests (curiosities, fascinations, entertainment, knowledge, fear, condemnation, control, elimination) with respect to the subculture in question...they may be seen to contribute to the ‘realism’ of particular subcultural essences.” Rather than relying on the indigenous/foreigner dichotomy, I have opted for a practitioner/non-practitioner framework. Beginning with the non-practitioner, I suggest two primary viewpoints. The first is:

1. The non-practitioner unfamiliar with more than the superficial elements of Ifa/Orisha.

There are significant differences in how this viewpoint is expressed or articulated across cultural and/or national groups. Degrees of familiarity are directly related to exposure. In areas that include a significant number of active practitioners (engaged in visible and public expressions of worship), even those unfamiliar with African spirituality may recognize certain symbols, representations, and other elements. A citizen of New York or New Orleans, for example, may frequently come across shrines, botanicas, and popular representations of the Orishas. In Haiti, the lwa are well-known even by non-practitioners, as well as in Brazil where Umbanda is as familiar as Catholicism. In these communities, there are relatively few individuals genuinely unfamiliar with traditions influenced by Yoruba spirituality. The citizen of a community that is strictly Christian may never have seen anything beyond a Voodoo horror film. To clarify, unfamiliar in this case refers to those who have had a relatively low level of exposure, and are non-participants, as well as non-practitioners. The difference is that an individual may be a participant without engaging in practice of any kind, including worship, sacrifice, or ritual.

In areas of low exposure, communities that practice sustained engagement with Ifa/Orisha are rarely, if ever, encountered. Individuals and groups unfamiliar with African religions are more vulnerable to specific channels of representative ideation (churches, television, film, etc.) and more likely to express or recognize negative associations (occultism, black magic, superstition, the reanimated dead, etc.). Where Ifa/Orisha is scarce or absent—particularly outside of Nigeria—the representatives and storytellers of the religion cannot defend their own interpretations and expressions, reassign unfavorable meanings, or “deal with outsiders” (Prus 1997:138) in constructive ways.

2. The non-practitioner familiar with Ifa/Orisha.

This viewpoint is found among the Yoruba, as well as Africans and non-Africans familiar with Ifa, Candomblé, Santeria, Umbanda, Vodun, Spiritismo, et cetera. Scholars who study the traditions or those who go to observe a ceremony are examples of participants who are not only recipients of traditional narratives but in some way contribute to their proliferation. In terms of exposure, participant non-practitioners do not rely on stereotypes or media representations, but are knowledgeable in at least several dimensions of Yoruba spirituality, including the Orishas and their representations, even the symbols and powers associated with them; the history of the religion; and the purpose of many rituals, including the much maligned “mounting,” or spirit possession. This group may be characterized by acceptance or tolerance; however, this is not always the case: “[u]ntil the latter part of the 1960s, the Catholic influence was so prevalent in the dominant culture...”

20 Prus would likely characterize Ifa/Orisha as transnational and transsocietal, as well as encompassing “virtually all areas of participants’ lives” (1997:45). Participants may engage in “cyclical” or “occasional subcultural phenomena,” depending on the extent of their involvement and role. Even priests or babalawo may engage in other life-worlds that only marginally involve the religion, fully engaging their function only during ceremonies, consultations, and similar activities.

21 Sandra T. Barnes (1997:17) writes: “Umbanda is the main beneficiary of an outsourcing of books, conferences, and theological writings that explain Umbanda’s theological premises and thereby systematize and legitimate this faith in ways that are characteristic of world religions. In the process, Umbanda has become a national religion that embraces racially mixed congregations.”

22 Researchers are most certainly participants. Prus (1997:224) writes, “[m]ethodological research is not only an interpretive, cooperative, and interactive process, but it is also a mutual process.”

23 For a good account of spirit possession and how it is perceived by non-practitioners, as well as the importance of this element to African spirituality and religion, see: Walker (1980).

24 Michael A. Nicklas (1990:96) writes: “[m]ass culture in Brazil can be characterized by acceptance and embracing of this emerging culture. It is estimated that there are roughly 300,000 Afro-Brazilian groups in Brazil.”

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that the Afro-Brazilian groups, including Umbanda, were thought not to represent a religion” (Nicklas 1990:91). Instead, they were considered ethnic cult groups, characterized by a certain insularity described by Walker (1980:32): “[t]he purpose for keeping slaves from the same group together was not humanitarian in inspiration. On the contrary, the rationale was that such a practice should insure that slaves from different groups remain conscious of their own specific ethnic identity.” The insularity that preserved Yoruba identity and tradition also slowed the process of social integration that would eventually result in the creation of Umbanda. Still, as entrenched paradigms of dominance and subordination give way to new patterns of social exchange and globalization, the insularity that formerly characterized religions like Candomblé or Haitian Vodun are giving way to new models of practice that may boast larger spheres of cultural influence.

In exchange, however, there is the contention that a high degree of syncretism endangers the authenticity of a given system. Lindsay Hale (2001) writes:

“Perhaps the most significant element that affects outsiders’ appraisal of Yoruba practice is animal sacrifice—indeed, the emphasis on sacrifice in general. Human sacrifice is forbidden, of course, and there is an Odua verse that explains why.26 but the practice is nonetheless often attributed to African traditional religions. One respondent, a practitioner of traditional Peruvian shamanism, specifically Ayahuasca, expressed this view of African practices: “Working with any spirits that require blood sacrifice is dangerous. The intentions of the practitioner may be good, but spilling blood in exchange for power is black magic; the intentions no longer matter. That kind of practice is corruptive” (personal communication, November 2012). These qualms are more often expressed by Westerners and spiritual tourists, however. While the blood and certain organs are offered as part of an ebo, the rest of the animal is in most cases eaten. Still, a typical initiation ritual necessitates the sacrifice of different animals, including rats, turtles, goats, et cetera (personal communication, May 2012), and these animals are killed in a ritual context expected to elicit the participation of a deity or spirit that responds to the blood of those animals.27 Particularly from a Christian perspective, blood sacrifice is not only unnecessary, but in many cases considered offensive. The emphasis in Ifa/Orisha on blood sacrifice is doubly alarming given the animistic premise of ascribing not only sentience but intelligence to animals and even plants. Many Odu verses feature narratives involving non-human and non-Orisha actors, including the Òò Otor, a charming story about an earthworm who enters heaven to confront his father and earn the inheritance that his brothers (various species of snake) de- nied him: power (ise). This power is what enables the earthworm to burrow (Fama 1994:87-103). There are many Odu verses that serve to explain features of the natural world, describe interrelations common to social life, and establish parameters of behavior in a world populated by spirits of all kinds.

The respondent identified as a practitioner of Peruvian shamanism also indicated that there is a tendency to associate African practitioners with the brujo of South America, who practice without a strict moral compass (personal communication, November 2012). Morally “right” or “wrong” are difficult terms to unravel in this context, but based on the answers of respondents familiar with indigenous shamanic traditions, the ethical framework of the system depends on the use of power, itself dependent on the deity to which a practitioner directs his or her worship.28 Some are morally gray, unpredictable deities; others are dangerous and demand highly questionable practices from their wor- shipers; others are benevolent, “white” deities. Similarly, one may use his or her access to the spiritual world for good or for ill, to heal or to harm; and he or she will reap the consequences accordingly. One respondent, a Yoruba worshiper, said: “This man went to consult the priests, and they told him that he should not send Esu to kill someone. He did not listen. He went and consulted Esu, and Esu turned against him. He died” (personal communication, March 2013). It is clear that the Ifa Corpus is not morally neutral; many of the stories in the tradition encourage moral behavior. Still, the principal emphasis is not on morality as such, but on performing the prescribed ebo.

Participants in Ifa/Orisha engage a larger community of practitioners and worshippers that accept as true the fundamental premises of the religion, in whole or in part. The efficacy of babalawo and certain rites is assumed (Maus 2001:114-120) and reinforced through periodic or cyclical engagement.29

26 Margaret Thompson Drewal (1997:207) writes: “[s]pirit medi- umship is the most significant role of a priest.” Similarly, Walker (1980:28) writes: “[t]he world view of the African and Afro-American societies in question is such that the altered state of consciousness manifested in the act of spirit possession is highly desirable and ardently sought.”

27 See Durkheim’s (1995:347) analysis of sacrifice: “[s]acrifice is certainly a process of communion in part. But it is also, and no less fundamentally, a gift, an act of renunciation.”

28 Specifically, a verse and ebo from the Ìrẹ̀ Mèjì, here translated by the Azúrìgh of Osogbo, Yemi Elèbíòbún: “[Orunmila] said, as from today on, no Ifa priest should use human blood to appease his inner head any longer” (Elèbíòbún 2004:79). The story, essentially, is that Òrunmìlì, god of divination, was on the verge of unknowingly purchasing his own son for sacrifice; when he heard the boy recite verses that only his son could have known, he recalled a barren woman he had met in the bush.

29 Durkheim (1995:215) writes: “[t]hus, both the moral pow- er conferred by opinion and the moral power with which sacred beings are invested are fundamentally of the same origin and composed of the same elements.” For Durkheim, the totemic principle at the base of religious activity is a so- cial and, to a certain extent, a moral one. It is this principle that imbues subsequent ideations of gods and goddesses. However, it seems that this fundamental principle is more than capable of more complex diversification, embodying experiences that are degrading as well as uplifting, terrify- ing as well as inspiring, grotesque as well as sublime. If so, the moral element is removed from prominence and associ- ated more with the maintenance of good relations between the mortal and divine worlds.

32 Prus (1997:46) writes, “[b]icultural subcultures refer to those realms of involvement that entail a seasonal or calendar di- mension...At more of a local community level, any variety of festivals and events represent annual or seasonal instances in which certain (subcultural) practices may be invoked.”
More importantly, however, involvement is maintained through narrative and storytelling, active on many levels in a variety of forms. Dynamic narratives that are taken from sacred space and integrated into profane life are essential for two reasons: first, they maintain both personal and collective connections to the sacred space of the rite or consultation (where/when the narrative was created), and secondly, they strengthen symbolic or mythic associations to the belief system. When the outcome of an Ifa consultation comes to pass, in one form or another, participants are quick to point out that it was because the rite was effective in eliciting the involvement of certain entities.

Unfamiliarity with Ifa/Orisha may create a belief based on fear, superstition, and stereotype. For example, upon stating my desire to visit Oshogbo, one Nigerian respondent expressed genuine concern and apprehension, vehemently indicating that—though she was from Lagos—she would not go anywhere near the Osun Shrine. When I asked why, she maintained that witches were known to kidnap people and forcibly convert them. The witches would either remain among them indefinitely, or would leave entirely transformed by the experience, virtually unrecognizable to their families (personal communication, October 2011).

Sustained engagement with Ifa/Orisha may be due to experience (i.e., a “genuine” religious and/or mystical experience validating the premises of the tradition [Prus 1997:137]) or traditional upbringing (a form of cultural or collective experience). Nearly all of the Yoruba respondents indicated one or both of these influences. In many cases, the second exists as a cultural and ethnic gestalt; most Yoruba respondents claimed relatives who were practitioners and/or participants. Younger respondents of Yoruba origin (18-24) exhibited a greater diversity of responses with respect to participation and experience. Among those who claimed direct relatives who were worshipers, initiates, or practitioners, belief was a more pronounced element, often due to personal experience or exposure to a pervasive, social narrative of affirmation. Members of a congregation reinforce one another’s belief and continued investment, not only as a means of maintaining the solidarity of communal identity, but also to perpetually rejuvenate the mythology. If Osun, Ogun, Esu, and the other deities were not considered very much active and alive, the Ifa/Orisha tradition may have since become no more than an ethnographic curiosity.

Interestingly, one practitioner admitted that without collective belief many of the Orishas would fade away from the world. I asked him what happened to spirits when they faded away. He shrugged and answered: “They go into the earth to sleep” (personal communication, January 2012). Mauss (2001:154) writes: “[a] group’s beliefs and faith are the result of everyone’s needs and unanimous desires. Magical judgments are the subject of a social consensus, the translation of a social need under the pressure of which an entire series of collective psychological phenomena are let loose.” The Orishas are certainly believed to respond to needs, embodying forces that tangibly affect the objects and circumstances of personal and public life. Individual lives are bound up in a multitude of engagements that may feature the Orishas, Odu, ase, or other elements of the religion as a common, binding narrative that may provide a sense of both personal and collective continuity. In the midst of radical change, it may be that Yoruba participants are reinforcing their collective identity through Ifa/Orisha in the same way that groups in South America and throughout the Diaspora use comparable spiritual traditions to construct and realize group identity.

Among both Christians and Muslims in Nigeria who strongly identified with their religion, skepticism or antagonism towards Ifa/Orisha often arose from doctrinal loyalty. They considered Yoruba spirituality a brand of idol worship. Importantly, unlike those who did attribute some sort of power to Ifa and the Orishas, respondents in this grouping indicated that the Orishas simply did not exist, and that those who worshipped them were performing meaningless gestures before empty objects. Respondents who expressed this position were either Western, or Christian Nigerians exposed to Western culture and education.35 Northern Nigerians expressed both of these positions far more commonly than they did any kind of belief. However, non-Yoruba, Hausa Muslims who believed in juju, charms, talismans, bush-splashes, and the like were likely to attribute actual power to the Orishas of Yorubaland while claiming that those spirits “didn’t belong to them” (personal communication, November 2011). Skepticism also appeared among certain younger participants; one respondent indicated that he did not know enough to say whether the spirits did not exist, and did not want to offend them in the event that they did (personal communication, May 2012).

Many younger respondents who opposed traditional practices expressed a curiously high degree of nationalism. Rather than see traditional practices as a unique and irreplaceable cultural resource, they viewed them as hindrances to modernization and development. Respondents dismissed indigenous practices as primitive and obsolete, rooted in an ignorance of the natural world and the discoveries of science.

The Nigerian movie industry, known as Nollywood, produces many films that present indigenous African religions as malevolent, sinister, or as the antithesis of Christianity or Islam. Adelakun (2010) writes: “[l]overs of Nigerian films will be familiar with this trend: a man or woman who wants to harm his/her neighbor goes to Ifa priest to help. He/She is given a charm and the evil intention most likely succeeds…a Christian pastor or Islamic cleric is invited to pray for him/her…the power of light which Christianity/Islam represents is seen as having triumphed over darkness and evil which the African traditional religion is seen as representing.” Yoruba filmmakers are responding with productions of their own.36 Unlike other, lesser-known indigenous African traditions, Ifa/Orisha is international. Many practitioners are taking advantage of this fact by...

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35 Bear in mind that most education in southern and eastern Nigeria is “Western.” Traditional educational models, based on apprenticeship, direct observation, and social narrative, still exist; but, formal education as such is typically British or American in format. Western educational models are mission-based and aggressively Christian, or they are products of an intellectual tradition that is expected to encourage development and modernization—often at the expense of valuing a rapidly diminishing cultural heritage.

36 Prus (1997:24-75) writes: “[w]here outsiders define certain subcultures as undesirable, they may sponsor certain kinds of media messages in attempts to discredit the practices and participants associated with specific subcultures…Subcultural insiders wishing to promote their own pursuits may also sponsor media messages as tools.”
promoting Yoruba religion as a cultural resource. My own interest and involvement was interpreted in this light, and I was encouraged by several practitioners to represent their belief system accurately and honorably to the outside world.

One thing that becomes clear when inquiring into the philosophy of indigenous practice is that faith is not defined in the same terms; that is, in the sense of holding something as true that cannot be proven. Rather, sufficient evidence is considered abundant. This is true for many shamanic and traditional practices; they are based on tangible results in the physical, phenomenal world. Practitioners are generally paid by their clients, and as such are part of the economic system of a given culture, offering a service in exchange for money or goods. Simply put, if they do not deliver, any trust in the efficacy of their work will be erased, and they will not be called upon to perform any of the services attributed to the traditional practitioner. In Ifa, for example, a diviner’s predictions are expected to come true; moreover, if a threat is averted, it is also expected that the client should know and recognize that the “treatment” prescribed by the diviner successfully protected him/her. Chief Fama (1994:39) writes in her explanation of the Ifa attending the Irosin Oghé: “In Yoruba culture, only versatile and proficient Babalawos are qualified to divine for kings. In the past, a Babalawo that divined for an Oba was required to live in the palace until his Ifa messages came to pass.”

Mauss (2001:115) writes: “there has always been a pressing urge to support magical beliefs by providing precise, dated, and localized proof,” and: “along with this ‘will to believe,’ there is plenty of proof of actual belief” (2001:118). The practitioner is willing to believe in the efficacy of his own rites because, as Mauss (2001:118) argues, “[he] is not a free agent. He is forced to play either a role demanded by tradition or one which lives up to his client’s expectations.” Obviously, among non-practitioners who discredit Ifa/Orisha, the rites belonging to the tradition are at best devoid of meaning, and at worst a perpetuation of an entrenched, ignorant form of primitive cult worship. Among practitioners, however, the efficacy of ritual practices is determined by a relatively liberal process of interpretation and association. While the Orishas themselves do not act outside of their jurisdictions or contrary to the entire (and often contradictory) range of their temperaments and habits, the symbolic and literal chain of events that links the ritual to its objective can assume a variety of forms. Similarly, when an objective is not attained, there are any number of explanations for the failure; not the least of which is the absence of sufficient use, typically attained and strengthened through sacrifice. If this happens, there is a bargaining, a give-and-take between the practitioner and his client (personal communication, January 2013) that may include adding to the originally prescribed sacrifice. If the second attempt proves fruitless, only then is the credibility of the practitioner called into question—and quickly diffused by a willingness to believe that the spirits proved uncooperative on this occasion.

When asked to explain why he believed without doubt, a Yoruba non-practitioner familiar with Ifa maintained that anyone who doubted should ask around. Everyone will tell you that it works. There was this man who stole a lot of money from a worshiper. The worshiper goes to consult Ifa, and they now tell him that he should make a sacrifice. If he makes this sacrifice, the man will die. Within seven days, he died. (personal communication, November 2012)

I asked the respondent whether this was considered “black magic,” and he indicated that it was dangerous to send a spirit after someone, but that the men and women who did such things were dangerous people.

I should point out that there is no “secular Ori-sha-ism” in Nigeria; no move towards separating the cosmological and supernatural elements from its moral, social, or ethical dimensions. In fact, this would likely be impossible. Many outsiders, particularly practitioners from the United States, perceive African spiritual traditions as composed primarily of supernatural and ritualistic elements, and containing very little, if any, intellectual or moral components. This is not an uncommon perspective among those with a low degree of exposure to Yoruba concepts. The picture changes considerably among those with higher degrees of exposure, and is entirely different among those who are familiar with the traditions.

Witchcraft—prominent examples of which are constantly circulated across a variety of mediums—is aligned with what a Westerner would call “black magic.” Many Nigerians believe witches to belong to “secret societies,” or cabals of practitioners who are responsible for any number of crimes and catastrophes across the country. Active in both rural and urban areas, secret societies are believed to abduct and initiate children, commanding them to steal from or murder their families. Adult members are believed to possess a range of terrible powers, most of them malignant in nature. Opposed to secret societies and their nefarious members are priests, pastors, preach- ers, traditional healers and medicine-men. More than a few Nigerians, even in the north, carry various charms that ostensibly protect them from the manifestations of witches. These charms and amulets are

36 My methodology in gaining practitioners’ trust is advocated by Prus (1997:22); “[p]rather than becoming a convert...it may be more accurate to envision an effective researcher as one who takes on the situated role of an apprentice in the world of the other...insiders who adopt roles of teachers, guides, or research partners of sorts are particularly effective in communicating their experiences with the researcher.”

37 Including church newsletters. In one example, on the “testament” page of a particular newsletter, a “witness” claimed to have been abducted and forcibly initiated into a snake cult (a popular theme in Nigeria) where she was made to kill hundreds of innocent people in savage rituals. She was allegedly responsible for conducting the souls of her victims to the leader of this “secret society.” This went on for years before she was found and redeemed by missionaries from this particular congregation (from Lord’s Chosen newsletter, April 2012).

38 I became privy to an alleged instance of child-related witchcraft in 2013. The story began when I was informed that the young daughter of a friend’s brother had been accused of trying to murder her grandmother, with whom she was living at the time. Christian pastors were brought in, and they declared that the girl was possessed. They were unable, however, to exercise the influence. About four months later, after another thwarted attempt to kill her grandmother, the child informed her family that members of a secret society was to blame for the girl’s illness. Shortly afterward, the young girl died in the hospital. Everyone with whom I spoke concerning this affair expressed no doubt whatsoever that a secret society was to blame for the girl’s illness and death (personal communication, April 2013).
provided for a fee, and are composed of various local herbs bound in leather. The more powerful (and more expensive) charms are bound in pieces of burial shroud taken from an exhumed corpse (personal communication, March 2013).

Interestingly, Ifa practitioners themselves acknowledge the existence of secret societies that work with evil, “black,” or “red” deities. A balatula indicated that “The red is always looking for blood. Whenever something terrible happens and many people die—that is the red. Those who serve the red are always looking to kill, and take the blood” (personal communication, December 2011). The priest went so far as to name a number of recent accidents and insist that they were the work of practitioners who were using those accidents as a means of mass ritual sacrifice. However, practitioners of “bad magic” are punished if caught, and typically executed (personal communication, December 2011). Individuals unfamiliar with Ifa may be unaware that practitioners worship opposing deities and vie with one another for influence and spiritual territory. A Yoruba worshiper informed me that a group of practitioners from a neighboring town frequently assaulted Ile-Ife using bad magic, and that the babalawo indicated that “The red is always looking for blood. When something terrible happens and many people die—that is the red. Those who serve the red are always looking to kill, and take the blood” (personal communication, May 2012). Foreigners who are unfamiliar with traditional religions of Yorubaland (and Africa in general) may not realize that it is an often violent spiritual landscape. However, Nigerian respondents indicated that this is common knowledge; good and evil practitioners have always warred with one another, and both Christians and Muslims freely superimpose angelic and demonic connotations on extant narratives of earlier, precolonial traditions. Still, inasmuch as both Christianity and Islam are exclusive faiths, there is a diminishing space in Nigeria (particularly urban Nigeria outside of the Yoruba nation) for traditional religious specialists.40

Since the revivalist predilections of contemporary spirituality, the traditions of the developing world have attracted the attention of those interested in reclaiming, appropriating, and translating the wisdom of cultures that have not entirely succumbed to the homogenizing influence of modernization and globalization. Ifa is no longer another backward religion indistinguishable from similar religions throughout South America, Oceania, and Africa. It has become an untapped treasure-trove of active forces that address very earthly and material needs in ways the monotheistic religions do not. For practitioners, the ability to integrate diverse expressions across varied mediums of exchange allows for an interface unavailable to many indigenous systems throughout the Continent. However, interactions between the storytellers of Ifa/Orisha and the extended worlds of both practitioners and non-practitioners are opening spaces of unpredictability, conflict, and negotiation.41

Whether the commoditization of spirituality is positive or negative is not a question addressed by this article (see: Carrette and King [2005] for a detailed analysis of this phenomenon). Suffice it to say that the Yoruba traditions have not escaped the attention of a peculiar sort of consumer: the spiritual tourist. Just like any other resource on the market, value is proportionate to demand. Identifying the nature of the demand is necessary to understanding exactly how Ifa/Orisha is valued or objectified as a commodity. The demand itself tells us about the consumer, and a distinguishing characteristic of the spiritual tourist is a willingness to believe in at least one aspect of the premises that support a given tradition. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to be reductionist here, and many spiritual tourists myopically impose Western dichotomies on indigenous systems, that is, traditional versus globalized, genuine versus mediated, original versus derivative. Seen from behind this tinted lens, Yoruba spirituality becomes another romanticized religion, closer to an idealized source.42

As part of the Diaspora, Yoruba spirituality is easily as global as any of the major religions. As a highly syncretic religion, particularly in the Americas, one finds the Orishas commonly mediated through analogous Catholic saints. The Yoruba pantheon is also a composite of deities brought together from a variety of tribal groups in the precolonial history of West Africa. J.D.Y. Peel (1997:275) writes on Ogun: “[t]he prominence of any one of Ogun’s potential meanings or functions in a particular place depends partly on local circumstances...it is also affected by what other deities are present in any local complex of cults...These complexes are the practical, concrete reality of Yoruba religion.” However, Ile-Ife is known as the “Source,” and it is more than likely that there are elements of the Corpus that have remained relatively unchanged since the Bantu Expansion. The perception of practitioners is that Ifa/Orisha has survived, and the further one moves from urban centers built on the history of colonialism, the greater the likelihood that threads of older practices continue to find expression “in the bush.”

Africa, and Nigeria in particular, is developing quickly. Perceptions of traditional religions are changing; their continued survival is not due solely to their ability to adapt and change, but also to their ability to resist change. Yoruba spirituality has been able to walk this tightrope in Nigeria, but—as is historically the case—traditions need defenders and advocates who are capable of representing and resolving this tension between resistance and adaptation. These representatives participate in the construction of multi-vocal narratives that allow the voice of the religion to be heard in different contexts (e.g., local, national, global) and translate that voice into mediums foreign to it. For example, traditional practitioners likely did not need to explain the mythology or reasoning underlying their work anymore than a citizen of classical Greece needed to be told who the Olympians were. Now, invited into a marketplace that extends across cultures, the Orishas are obligated to explain themselves in ways that accommodate others’ beliefs even for the magician.”43

40 Again, this is not true in the Diaspora where the number of initiates and practitioners is growing.

41 Pross (1997:44) writes: “[i]n all instances, however, it is the connectedness of interactants that provides the essential foundation of the larger (translocal, regional, transnational) subculture in question.”

42 Carrette and King (2005:78) are highly critical of spiritual tourism, and with good reason: “[w]hile ‘New Age’ followers dance the gospel of self-expression, they service the financial agents and chain themselves to a spirituality of consumerism. While they selectively ravage the feel-good fabric of ancient cultural and religious traditions, their disciplines and practices can easily isolate them from the resources of social justice and community to be found within those same traditions.”

43 According to Mauss (2001:119), “[m]agic is believed and not perceived. It is a condition of the collective soul, a condition which is confirmed and verified by its results. Yet it remains mysterious even for the magician.”
The River That Crosses an Ocean: The Relationship between Ritual Actions and Their Intended Effect

In effect, the point of interaction between practitioners and non-practitioners is not only ideological and social but direct. The Yoruba spiritual tradition is primarily concerned with the world, and it is therefore active in the world, rather than eschewing worldly pleasures and acquisitions. Belief is reinforced by two key elements: a causal and direct relationship between ritual actions and their intended effects, and the fact that the symbolic narrative of the tradition is continuously adapted and rewritten to suit changing social contexts. Given these elements, it is no surprise that Yoruba spirituality survives and continues to proliferate across many of the same channels that once facilitated the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In fact, West African spirituality—not limited to the Ifa/Orisha traditions of Nigeria—has not only survived but has adapted itself to a world dominated by the neoliberal marketplace.

**Philosophy**

Ifa/Orisha is a polytheistic system. Theickering, anthropomorphized deities of classical mythology in the Western world are not dissimilar to the Yoruba gods, who likewise quarrel, engage in common human behavior, and experience difficulty. The Orishas are also assigned powers and jurisdictions; they possess defining characteristics and are easily syncretized with comparable deities across ethnic and cultural groups. Also similar to the gods of old, the Orishas have very specific preferences and taboos that must be observed by worshipers and initiates. The deities are actors in an extensive corpus of narratives that serve a number of functions: they answer questions about the appearance and machin- ery of the natural world; they establish the boundaries of ethical behavior; they stabilize and validate the social and political community.

The mythology changes and adapts depending on the practitioner and the lineage. Bascom (1980:32) writes: “if one pulls strings, supplement, and at times contradict what is known about Yoruba religion, revealing how beliefs vary, with cult members often assigning greater importance to their own deity than is generally recognized.” Practitioners may be any of the following:

3. Priests, priestesses, babalawo, et cetera, who conduct ceremony and perform sacrifices, initiations, divinations, and consultations, and administer traditional medicines. Included in this set are those who engage in rituals of “mounting” or spirit possession.

4. Initiates who are not qualified to perform advanced ceremonies, and who are undergoing apprenticeships. This set is complicated by a number of initiates who do not receive instruction in the traditional way, that is, living with the priest and learning through direct observation. Some may travel periodically to receive instruction or participate in ceremony, supplementing their instruction by accessing modern sources of information, including transcriptions of the Corpus.

**Outsiders** generally identify this ritual with Haitian Vodun, but it is an integral part of West African spirituality. Margaret Thompson Drewel (1997:207) writes: “Ifa (the Ifaropic and personal/private worship and ritual exist in Ifa/Orisha. The babalawo is the priest, and the wilderness may well serve as a temple of collective worship. There is both mystery and openness in the tradition that bridges the untamed forest and the village, the seemingly changeless rural settlements with urban centers that race towards modern development. In many ways, it is the magical character of Yoruba religion that works as the primary locus of unity, coherence, and narrative compatibility. This is uncommon, inasmuch as knowledge transmission and instruction are generally highly localized and depend on the unbroken continuity of a specific stock of rites, rituals, formulae, et cetera. The open dissemination of magical knowledge is counterproductive. However, what is remarkable here is that the religious elements of Ifa/Orisha do not exist independently of the mythological and magical elements, but work to bolster them by empowering local practitioners. By accessing the religious elements—social, moral, philosophical, and mythological (inasmuch as mythologies cross religious-magical boundaries [Mauss 2001:105])—practitioners are able to reinforce the ongoing myths of collective participation and strengthen the relevance of symbolic correlations between disparate fields of engagement.
5. Worshipers. Many worshipers keep shrines to the Orishas in their homes, participate in public ceremonies, and engage in a variety of other activities that express belief in the deities—drumming, reenactments, swordplay, et cetera. Thousands of worshipers attend ceremonies dedicated to Osun, Shango, Ogun, and Obatala.

All of these are considered to be familiar with the tradition; based on interviews with practitioners from each of these sets, I will briefly discuss a few major premises that address the philosophy of the religion.

The first regards the relationship between human-kind and the divine. Unlike the three primary monotheistic religions of the world, human beings cannot address the Creator directly. Oludumare can be accessed only through intermediaries, each with its own jurisdiction, power, and relationship to the others. These intermediaries are the Irunmolé, the Olu, the Orishas, ancestors, and innumerable lesser spirits. While many of these deities are considered “good,” most of them nevertheless occupy a range of moral positions. They can be aligned in accordance with three primary forces: white, black, and red. An Ifa priest described the deities associated with these forces in the following way: “...white is cool-headed, good, helpful, creative, and life-giving. Red is hot-headed, violent, powerful, virile, and difficult to appease. Black is unpredictable, dangerous, and destructive” (personal communication, May 2012).

There are troublesome spirits as well, akin to the demons of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions, but they are not linked to a single orchestrating source of evil. It is often problematic to outsiders from the West that Ifa/Orisha spirituality does not abstract and personify Good and Evil in the same way that the monotheistic religions do. In fact, West African spirituality is arguably more complex in its polytheism than the duality that frames many expressions of monotheistic theology. The neo-Platonism and Manichean philosophy that influences Christianity is absent here. This does not mean that the practice is amoral, but rather that the individual is responsible for his or her own harmony and balance.

In Ifa, balance is negotiated between the human being and his or her ori (inner head or ancestral spirit). Similar to Western concepts of the Spirit, the ori is virtually autonomous in its own right, appointed to an individual as a guide.47 An individual can have a “good head” or a “bad head” (Bascom 1980:34), implying good or bad fortune. Respondent practitioners indicated that the ori is often called one’s “destiny.” Durkheim (1995:283) addresses this concept in his analysis of the individual totem or ancestor spirit: “[w]e cannot become fully merged with it because we ascribe to it a stature and a respect that lift it above us and our empirical individuality.” This holds true for the ori. An individual that neglects to satisfy his or her “inner head” will be chastised and made to endure all manner of misfortune; not only on account of his or her ori, but because the withdrawal of the ori’s protection attracts the influence of negative forces (personal communication, January 2012). For Durkheim, the ancestor spirit was a personification of a doubled self (1995:283), a means of resolving the duality that characterized the social, communal involvement of an individual as distinct from the day-to-day responsibilities more properly belonging to the profane realm (1995:390). This suggests that the displeasure of this ancestor spirit is a projection of the communal self’s 48 shame, based on the awareness that he or she may have strayed beyond the accepted norms or conventions of his or her social obligations. This may not be entirely untrue as the ori’s sanctions are responses to moral or social transgressions (i.e., not paying for a sacrifice, failing to respect a mutual contract, etc.). However, practitioners also indicated that taboos may be entirely personal in nature, having nothing to do with social conventions or regulations, and that these taboos are imposed by an individual ori in accordance with a highly intimate relationship.

These taboos are given to initiate—or rather, revealed to initiate—by a babalawo in ceremony. They remain thereafter a secret matter, to be steadfastly observed by the individual. Indeed, a practitioner indicated that to openly speak of one’s personal taboos is dangerous, insofar as it more easily leads to his or her breaking them (personal communication, May 2012).

The spirit of an individual, associated with his or her energy or power (ase), is strengthened in two ways: when one is in alignment with his or her inner head/destiny, and through worship and sacrifice. Ase is both personal and impersonal; it can be stolen, exchanged, gifted, and drained. It can also confer an ability or power on an individual, and it is considered the source of talents and/or unique characteristics. John Pemberton (1997:124) writes: “[a]se does not entail any particular signification, and yet it invests all things, exists everywhere, and, as the warrant for all creative activity, opposes chaos and the loss of meaning in human experience. Nevertheless, ase may be used for destructive ends.”

Ase is comparable to the mana treated by Durkheim (1995:214): “the environment in which we live seems populated with forces at once demanding and helpful, majestic and kind, and with which we are in touch. Because we feel the weight of them, we have no choice but to locate them outside ourselves,” and, “[r] eligious forces are in fact only transfigured collective forces, that is, moral forces; they are made of ideas and feelings that the spectacle of society awakens in us...they are superadded” (1995:327). Mauss categorizes mana as a quality, thing, and force (2001:135), describing it “like something superimposed on another. This extraneous substance is invisible, marvelous, spiritual—in fact, it is the spirit which contains all efficacy and life” (2001:137). This idea is central to both magic and religion, particularly in their earliest forms; although, even in Protestant Christianity, the Holy Spirit is considered to work similarly (personal communication, September 2012). Ase is neutral, pervasive, and requisite for virtually any endeavor; it can be channeled into manual labor, artistry, and other human enterprises; in its unadulterated form, it is the fuel of ritual activity. An insufficient reserve of ase diminishes

47 Bascom (1980:34) writes: “[i]nformants stress the importance of the ancestral guardian soul, some even calling it a deity.”

In his translation of an Eji Ogbe verse, Orumilla is told to accord proper respect to the source of his good fortune: “[t]hey said, ‘Orumilla, you should shout about the one who made you so... Shout, ‘Head, oh! Head is what makes a boy a man. Yes’” (Bascom 1980:129).

48 What Freud termed the “superego.”
the efficacy of a rite. Ase is both individual and social, although it clearly exists at the intersection of individual and collective life. It can be cultivated individually and used to effect change in the social world. It is both necessary for, and strengthens sacrifice; and the most powerful sacrifices are performed collectively. Ase is weakened through disharmony with the ori, a tension that is incurred through—as Prus (1997:140) might suggest—a mismanagement of one life-world or another.\footnote{In other words, inasmuch as ase is also destiny, nearly every individual decision can be measured in terms of whether or not it accords with, deviates from, or directly opposes the fortunes allotted to one’s course in life. This may sound rather like predestination, and that comparison would not be entirely unjustified. However, participants emphasized the highly personal quality of the ase alongside its ubiquity; this personal quality was not unconditional, however, and one could lose his or her power, as well as gain, regain, and exercise it. It was in this way tied to personal actions, albeit relative to the community for the most part, though also dependent on the maintenance of entirely personal taboos and obligations.}

Ritual taboos are determined by the specific Ori-sha or lineage and typically involve restrictions that deal with diet, offerings, dress, and habits of worship. Consider this verse from the Owunrin:

[...]to be told and to like it/ To be given advice and to accept it/ Cast for Disobedience/ When he was going to take land for a farm on the road to Igbalè/ The hoe that cleared the land/ It chopped the head of Egungun./ Egungun opened his mouth and was singing/ “You knew the taboo/ Why did you do it?” (Bascom 1980:709)

The emphasis in these few lines is mirrored in many of the Odu verses and is centered on two elements: taboos and sacrifices. Taboos maintain an intricate network of relationships between the mortal and immortal communities and stress the importance of both discipline and obedience. Sacrifices serve in a similar capacity, and additionally facilitate exchanges between the two worlds. The blood of a particular animal sacred to an Orisha (e.g., as dogs for Ogun or white hens for Osun) serves as a conduit for the conveyance of a prayer or message. A response is expected from the Orisha in question. If there is no response, the ritual may be repeated or additional methods used to elicit a tangible reaction. If silence persists, the endeavor is abandoned and another means of address sought (personal communication, May 2012).

If one looks at religious concepts evolutionarily, according to the typology developed by Weber (1946; 1963) and Marriott (1955), the Orishas are “limited by their specificity. They fail to link diverse peoples together, because they are concrete, because they are parochial and therefore tied to concrete places and groups, and because they represent only part of the cosmos” (Barnes 1997:22). Barnes (1997:19) goes on to point out that evolutionary typologies of religion are entirely insufficient for an appropriate analysis of Ifa/Orisha deities: “[t]he ability to appeal to a universal…culturally plural audience rests on what a deity means: what, in fact, a deity signifies, symbolizes, suggests, and intends and the ways these elements are expressed.” Barnes’ (1997:19) analysis is focused on Ogun, who “is a profoundly satisfying symbolic expression of a human dilemma: how to balance the need for constraint against the need for freedom.”

Ogun is transcultural, Barnes (1997:20) suggests, in part because he is a “root metaphor,” in this case for an experience that is universal to humankind: the creator/destructor dichotomy, the smith who makes the tools that cultivate and the tools that kill. Obatala, Orunmila, Osun, Esu, Shango—are these also root metaphors for a vast range of individual and collective experiences?

Durkheim (1995) takes another approach, which merits consideration:

[...the tribal high god is actually none other than an ancestral spirit that eventually won a prominent place. The ancestral spirits are none other than entities forged in the image of the individual souls, the origin of which they are meant to account for. The souls, in turn, are none other than the form taken by the impersonal forces that we found at the basis of totemism. (p. 299)]

These anthropomorphized impersonal forces are similar to Barnes’s root metaphors, but, in the life-worlds of practitioners and participants alike, the Orishas are living entities that are at times dangerous, unpredictable, independent, and contradictory. Prus (1997:137) writes: “The primary concern is not over whether something is ‘truly religious’ or not, but rather with the ways in which people develop life-worlds around phenomena that they deem worthy of devotion in some more enduring respect.” Practitioners and participants both create multiple life-worlds around their relationships to various Orishas; respondents would likely insist that Osun, Esu, and the rest have multiple life-worlds of their own.

Questions of origin—of where the spirits “come from”—are relevant in terms of the mythology, but the spirits themselves are believed to maintain their own narrative continuums both in the present and backwards in time. So, it is equally likely that a practitioner would argue that people simply were not able to recognize the Orishas until by necessity or innovation their efforts brought them within the jurisdiction of one spirit or another. Sandra T. Barnes and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos (1997:39) write: “[b]asically, the Ogun concept encapsulated the progression from hunting to agriculture and the mastery of metallurgy, to urbanization and, ultimately, in these peoples’ own view, to the development of empire. In one symbolic complex there existed a recapitulation of each kingdom’s stages of growth.” One respondent indicated that “...the Orishas are always teaching us. They do not teach us until we are ready to learn.” I asked him, “What happens when you’ve learned all there is to learn?” The man laughed and said: “That is something only an oyinbo would say. There is always something to learn” (personal communication, January 2012). In other words, ase did not so much develop into the Orishas; rather, when human communities or singularly heroic individuals had attained a mastery of ase that enabled them to invoke the deities, the Orishas themselves instructed them in the rites that would thereafter order the relationship between the two worlds. The Orishas did not replace the concept of ase; it became the dominant currency in the dialogue between the mortal and spiritual worlds, no less important in today’s practices than the sacrificial offerings themselves.

Ifa/Orisha narratives are neither linear nor circular in time, but layered and beaded together by...
a consistent web of associations, symbols, and collective representations. The Orishas may be archetypal in a sense, but they are neither irreducible nor amorphously universal. Nor are they merely social forces wrapped in layers of mythology—not to the practitioner. They are actors in a larger drama that fuses societies (even across countries and oceans), acknowledges both individual and social roles, and preserves continuity through adaptation.

Respondents who identified themselves as strongly Christian or Muslim commonly viewed Ifa as a form of idolatry, which is only technically correct inasmuch as practitioners do make offerings “to” graven images. I use the quotation marks because I clarified this point with a priest of Osun:

“You do not make a sacrifice to the stones. The stones are not Ogun, they are not Esu. You do not worship the stones. It is this way: when you call the spirit, the spirit comes to the stones; there is a quality in the stones that can hold the spirit. You make a place for the spirit. You welcome the spirit, and when it is there, you can communicate with it. (personal communication, January 2013)

This is a crucial distinction, but it is sadly the case that Christians and Muslims opposed to traditional religious practices do not appreciate the difference.

Apologists of Yoruba spirituality have attempted to stress the importance of Oludumare to the Orisha pantheon. This, as Cox (2001) notes, is likely a direct result of the interaction between Ifa/Orisha and Islam and Christianity. Cox (2001) cites Andrew Walls (1996):

[for Walls, the fact that African religions almost everywhere have expanded their concept of God to include the Christian and Islamic emphases on an all-powerful Supreme Being makes the question of whether indigenous religions in precivilizational times actually conceived of such a God largely irrelevant for discussions of contemporary African beliefs. (p. 337)]

Peter McKenzie—whom Cox criticized earlier for imposing a purely Christian typology on Yoruba beliefs—writes on Ulli Bier’s analysis of Susanne Wenger’s influence and attempt to create a “universalist orisa doctrine”: “[h]er cosmology appears to be a kind of pantheism or panentheism, with Oludumare as the total of the All including the orisa, and with each orisa a personalization of the universe, a...condensation of the forces of the universe at a certain place, seen from a certain angle” (1976:196). There is a good reason to be highly critical of imposing a theist interpretation on Yoruba spirituality. Patrick J. Ryan (1980:162) writes that “[n]ot only outside observers but also certain African Christian insiders have perpetuated a tendency, perhaps unconscious, to describe African concepts of the transcendent in Semitic or Indo-Europian theological categories that are still basically foreign.”

Ryan (1980:166) goes on to point out that “[o]ver all these orisa, Oludumare (Olorun) reigns supreme, the ancestor of no patrilineage, adopted as the direct recipient of no individual’s sacrificial worship,” The question of a Supreme Deity may be of concern to non-practitioners seeking to create open lines of communication between the monotheistic religions and Yoruba spirituality. It certainly was for missionaries who may have hoped to stage a recurrent drama: the ascendance of a single, omnipotent, and all-encompassing God at the expense of a lesser pantheon of spirits that would either be destroyed (played out through a loss of followers) or otherwise subordinated (as evidenced by one respondent’s comparison of the orisha to archangels). However, while Christianity and Islam in Yorubaland are weathering away at traditional practices, the ability of worshipers and practitioners to adopt an inclusive position should not be underestimated.

A respondent addressed this issue in the following way: “Nowadays, people will pray to God or Jesus or Allah when it comes to things they cannot control. They still pray to the Orishas when it comes to things they believe they can—`their problems, their hopes, their work; these things are still entrusted to the Orishas” (personal communication, May 2012). Worshipers who adopt two religions see no conflict of interest in following both. The Orishas are not competing with God in any way; on the contrary, it is understood that they are closer to humankind and as such can act on behalf of God in matters that fall under their jurisdiction. The Orishas are not generally reduced to “manifestations” of God save by outsiders to the practice who are actively seeking to resolve a conflict that does not exist for many practitioners. Still, one initiate referred to this interpretation, saying:

“If that is how they want to see the Orisha, if that helps them understand the Orisha, then it is good. Only let them not be confused; each of the Orishas is different. Some of them are enemies and some of them are husband and wife. They are all worshipped differently.” (personal communication, January 2013)

The primary concern of the spiritual tourist—as with many tourists in general—is with authenticity. This is set against a contrary position of in-authenticity, a concept often expressed in terms of a reaction against the prevalence of aggressive missionary or conversion-based religions in developing countries. This perspective is directly related to the perceived philosophy of traditional religions as holistic, 53 Prus (1997:46) writes: “interfused subcultures [refer] to circumstantial in which people find themselves more or less simultaneously involved in or actively engaged in managing two or more situationally coexistent subcultures...What is most consequential about interfused subcultures are the multiplicity of `central' activities and the problematic and shifting nature of people's opportunities, involvements, and emphases within more or less concurrent timeframes.” One may apply this concept to individuals who engage two disparate religious matrices without necessarily partitioning loyalty. This is a complex symbolic and theological juxtaposition with a range of possible individual expressions.

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\(51\) Susanne Wenger, as McKenzie (1976:195) writes, was a “convert to the orisa [who provided] homes (shrines and images) for the orisa to settle in, after a long period of uprootedness. Susanne, an Ogbonì elder and a priestess of Obàtálá, has also to settle in, after a long period of uprootedness. Susanne, an Ogbonì elder and a priestess of Obàtálá, has also done much for the official cult of Oshogbo, Osun. She has given support to the orisa not only by encouraging astonishing works of art but also by formulating a kind of universalist orisa doctrine: “While many respondents evinced a respect of Wenger and her work, there were several who considered her influence detrimental to the indigenous preservation, expression, and interpretation of Yoruba religion. An answer to this concern, however, was voiced by a Yoruba respondent who said: “We can criticize her if we were doing something to preserve our own cultural heritage. She, a foreign woman, did more to preserve our traditions than we do—and now we are letting it go to waste again” (personal communication, May 2012).

\(52\) Durkheim (1955:288) expresses a similar concept: “[t]he average [Australian] tribes have achieved the conception of a god who, if not the only one, is at least the supreme one, and one to whom a prominent position among all other religious entities is ascribed.” What does it say about Ifa/Orisha that such an entity exists but cannot be invoked or otherwise addressed by humankind? It may indeed suggest that Oludumare is an impor-

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The River That Crosses an Ocean: Ifa/Orisha in the Global Spiritual Marketplace

There is another premise that merits attention in terms of how Ifa/Orisha is practiced and understood: the emphasis on worldly gains. Barnes (1997) puts it this way:

[if]frican religions tend to dwell on predicting, explaining, and controlling day-to-day circumstances such as illness, poverty, infertility, or bad luck…Stress on pragmatism is a part of non-Western traditions to a greater degree than in Western religious traditions, which put strong emphasis on transcendental functions, such as preparing for the hereafter or helping devotees gain faith or inner “grace.” (p. 22)

This is a complex point to unravel. Panem nostrum quotidiam da nobis hodie; in theory, worldly concerns may be second to otherworldly ones, but they are certainly not absent from the prayers of those who adhere to Western religious traditions. Second-ly, the emphasis of Ifa/Orisha ritual on the attainment of worldly successes is based on a premise of the utmost importance regarding the relationship between the earthly and spiritual; namely, that the earthly world is a reflection of, and directly connected to, the spiritual world. 54

Typically, practitioners and participants in magical and religious traditions consider the world of the spirits and the world of men to be one.

Obviously, the idea of Heaven, paradise, and eternity is related to this. However, Ifa/Orisha is somewhat different: this world, our world, is as much an arena of spiritual activity as is any other (personal communication, June 2012). Consequently, the boundaries between sacred and profane are perhaps more blurred and permeable in southwest Nigeria than elsewhere. Every place is potentially an intersection point between the world of humanity and the world of the Orishas; one may meet a spirit on the road without realizing what it is. Every object, whether by virtue of its composition, appearance, or purpose, can be drawn into a sacred context and imbued with additional meaning. These meanings are not fixed, but take an active role in the narratives constructed by worshippers and practitioners. One might think that taboos and prohibitions would abound, affixed to the simplest gestures and activities, and this would not be entirely inaccurate.

Many of the Orisha are earthbound spirits. One respondent indicated that they had “…gone into the ground,” and no longer journey to heaven (personal communication, May 2012). However, the Orishas can, and do, travel—even across oceans. This same respondent said of Osun: “Osun is a child of the sea. She tore free of her mother’s womb and became the source of all the rivers that run with cool water. You can go to any river and find Osun” (personal communication, January 2013). This story is likely a modern interpretation. Osun was at one point a relatively localized deity, bound to the river that bears her name. Osun is worshipped globally now, from New York to Rio, and devotees make offerings in ceremony on the banks of rivers.
with many names. What does this mean? It is common for new powers to be ascribed to spirits, in accordance with the circumstances of their manifestation in different contexts; consider the various appearances of the Virgin Mother.

Worshipers, initiates, and priests all indicate that specific human problems (e.g., related to finances, lovers, family, work, etc.) are best resolved by spirits that are associated with those domains via a complex network of associations and narratives (personal communication, 2011-2012). Ogun, for example, is considered by Yoruba Nigerians to safeguard road travel on account of his association with all things iron—including, apparently, cars. As the world expands, so too do the roles of the Orishas; they navigate the turbulent rivers of changing meaning more adeptly than many human communities. In many ways, we find them waiting at the crossroads of past and present, already dressed in the finery of the day. Now, Ogun can be found wearing army fatigues and carrying an assault rifle, marching alongside the soldier; Osun can be found dressed for a night on the town, both seductive and fierce. Change is important to practitioners of Ifa/Orisha. While there are many elements of worship that are timeless and universal, it is important that the traditions reflect the world rather than stand apart from it. Joseph M. Murphy (2001) writes:

An important element of religious belief is time. In monotheistic traditions, time can be divided into a number of periods: the mythic pre-historical (e.g., Genesis), the historical, the present, and a mythic future (e.g., Revelations). The progression from one period to another is typically perceived as linear, despite the recurrence of certain themes. Younger religions, if derived from older parent traditions, generally appropriate this narrative and reinterpret it, assigning new values and meanings to the most relevant symbols and altogether discarding or transforming others. Both Hinduism and Buddhism are patterned cyclically, while the monotheistic religions are considered to posit a terminus. Time works quite differently in the Ifa/Orisha tradition.

To outsiders conditioned to think linearly about the greater narrative of a religious system, it may seem that African traditions are left behind. While many belief systems also feature a prophetic or mythic future,66 the apocalyptic narrative is not emphasized by non-Western indigenous traditions. In contrast, the emphasis is on the present and immediate future, on frames of time. These frames do not bridge the past and present in the same way that a recitation of the Gospels or Qur'an does during a sermon; in that case the past is recalled to reinforce the significance of the present as a moment within a narrative unfolding towards a promised terminus. This is more pronounced in millenarian movements based in monotheism, including certain Protestant denominations that focus on an apocalyptic event. The present derives meaning and significance from a projected future, when the fundamental premises of the religion will be proven true.

K. Noel Amherd (2010:124) approaches this subject through language: “time is not water spiraling down a drain unattainably lost only to be represented through historiographic chronology... In this multitext, a person ascends, descends, traverses, reverses, and changes course, constantly relocating within realms nested inside each other, but remaining parts of a total whole.” Amherd (2010:125) goes on to say that while English “foregrounds an object’s boundedness as a thing that remains through time and space,” Yoruba verbs are “poly-temporal” and “modify both time and manifesting” so that while one might say in English it is dark, in Yoruba one might say “S/he/it darks/ed.” In a sense, darkness becomes a condition of manifesting, a state experienced by the subject as opposed to a static adjective or descriptor. Amherd (2010) explains the significance of this temporality here:

66 As, for example, the blended Christian-indigenous North American Ghost Dance religion founded by Wodziwob and later represented by its prophet, Jack Wilson. Alice Bock Kehoe (2006:79) writes: “[t]his was a complete religion. It had a transcontinental origin in the prophet’s visit to God, and a continuing power rooted in the eternal Father... ‘Ghost Dance’ is the name usually applied to Jack Wilson’s religion, because the prophet foresaw the resurrection of the recently dead with the hoped for renewal of the earth.”
survive even the most drastic changes imposed on the group that is united by those beliefs.38

Practitioners obviously do not interpret the Orishas in that way. An answer to the question of how they address the changefulness of their own belief system came in a roundabout way from their answer to my concerns about being an oyinbo trying to learn Ifa:

This will always be the Orishas’ home. But the world is far larger than our ancestors believed. The Orishas have always known. It is not that we brought them to other places, the way it is said. We found them waiting for us. You did not find Ifá here; it was Ifá that brought you here (personal communication, May 2012)

Practitioners do not see themselves as originating narratives—the world’s stories are encoded in the world itself, in the living experience of every human being. Rather, practitioners see themselves as generating, or regenerating, a matrix of narratives that they participate in.39 They are actors on the same stage as the spirits and deities they worship, and time becomes just another element in the story, measured in intervals between the prediction and its manifestation, between the sacrifice and its return. Intermingled with these exchanges are the conflicts, dilemmas, and experiences that constitute human life around the world. Embedded in these experiences are associative clues that connect to an active pantheon of root metaphors that will, and do, respond to the ritualized actions of their devotees. They make their influence known in countless ways, speaking through the people, objects, and circumstances that fall under their purview. New layers of experience represent new means of expression; the mythic does not need to be reinterpreted or recreated. Instead, new modalities are created to represent experiences that are both precedent for new iterations and echoes of an ongoing dialogue between the world of humankind and the world of the spirits.

Conclusion

There is a good deal of tension between the Abrahamic faiths and Ifá/Orisha traditions in Nigeria. While they are not persecuted, one need only look at the overwhelming number of Protestant initiatives and “Crusades” to realize that Christianity (much of it based in, and originating from, Nigerians) is aggressively pursuing an agenda of conversion. Islam, initially tolerant of other ethno-indigenous practices during the Sokoto Caliphate, is now shifting towards intolerance. These are the extremes of tension, active when an exclusionist religious system interacts with indigenous traditions. There are many other historical and cultural factors involved; for example, Christianity is associated with the West, and the West, in turn, with modernization, industrialization, and globalization. These are socio-historical matrices that dramatically affect local cultures and impact the creation and interpretation of religious narratives. Religions (Yoruba traditions are no exception) have their own ways of narrating history that may not accord with other versions of the story.

The Yoruba mythology is playful, remarkably human, and at times bitterly harsh. The transcendent, embedded in the movement of a history towards an inevitable and divinely ordained end, is found elsewhere in the immense corpus of orature related to Ifá/Orisha. Non-practitioners may find it difficult to locate the transcendent; not only because it is hidden from view but because it is seen through a lens that is specific to those who experience it firsthand. This experience is shaped by how the tradition is disseminated throughout the community. The narratives generated by those who became devotees through conversion are very different from those generated by individuals raised into a belief system by their families; and both are different from those generated by individuals who receive a calling—as many do, who choose to become advanced practitioners of Yoruba traditions.

In the spiritual marketplace, many religions are evaluated on the basis of accessibility. One Christian Nigerian respondent said: “Why are these spirits even necessary? I know what they say: God is distant, and the only way you can reach Him is through these spirits. But, they are not all good. I don’t need them. When I pray, I can feel God in my heart” (personal communication, April 2013). Christianity is an accessible religion; while it has many esoteric elements of its own, the promise of salvation and heavenly reward fundamental to the system is available to all who accept as true the major premises of the faith. Ifá/Orisha is somewhat different. While belief in the Orishas is open to all, the Orishas are not obligated to respond to those who do not actively participate in their worship (personal communication, October 2011). They are approached in very specific ways and through particular offerings. If an individual requires their assistance or blessing outside of a ritual context, there are other means—through talismans, herbs, and charms that essentially serve as mobile beacons capable of attracting the spirit in question. Still, to many—especially in the modern world—such fetishes represent ignorance and superstition. Is it not simply more effective to believe that a sincere prayer will accomplish the same result? Similarly, the knowledge required to properly petition the Orishas represents another barrier to accessibility that is difficult to surmount for outsiders and foreigners to the tradition.

Another source of tension is translation, in both the literal sense (much of the music of Yoruba is lost in English renditions, including puns, wordplay, and the artistry of the composition) and in the symbolic sense. Reducing deities to common denominators is a generally feeble attempt to strip an aggregate of conceptual associations (i.e., a deity) and reduce it to its original archetypal qualities—in the process stripping it of its history, distinctiveness, and cultural relevance. This is not always the case in syncretic religions, nor with African traditions in the Caribbean and Americas. On the contrary, many Orishas have expanded their roles, adopting new personas to address a multilingual congregation of devotees.

38 Durkheim, naturally, would entirely agree with this point, as would Marcel Mauss.
39 To bring in Robert Prus, these narratives are essentially life-worlds. Participants use Ifá/Orisha to actively construct and perpetually reshape these worlds accordingly as social meaning, changing circumstances, and necessity make necessary. That they are able to do so without compromising the integrity of their engagement is testament to how accessible, adaptable, and relevant the Orishas are to those who honor them, whether by tradition, choice, or both.
In the global spiritual marketplace, foreigners to the traditions also evaluate them on the basis of whether or not they are compatible with established narratives and systems of belief. Unfortunately, this subjects a given tradition to the “pick-and-choose” approach, a decidedly privileged and consumerist attitude towards religion. Traditional practitioners do not have the luxury of deciding whether or not to believe in a particular premise of their faith; to do so would invalidate the faith entirely. The Western spiritual consumer, however, is not restricted in the same way, particularly in the United States. He or she does not feel obligated to preserve the whole at the expense of accepting an unpleasant or possibly offensive aspect of the tradition. Instead, the latter can be abandoned and the remaining fragment juxtaposed to more palatable paradigms of practice. New religions are created out of this individualized habit of practice, disseminated through charismatic representatives, prophets, intellectuals, and through a universe of narratives composed by participants and practitioners. The question remains, however: what becomes of older forms of the tradition? Will they appear only in the records of former observers and participants, otherwise lost in their active form? Or, will they be recycled piecemeal, incorporated into new models better suited to modern life? Carrette and King (2005:85) offer a grim prediction on this note: “[a]s long as spirituality operates according to the dictates of global capitalism it will continue to contribute to the breaking up of traditional communities and the undermining of older, indigenous forms of life around the world.” In the next sentence, however, they offer a possible solution: “[capitalist spirituality, however, can be overcome by consideration of the forgotten social dimensions…by rescuing and developing alternative models of social justice, and by contesting the corporatization and privatization exemplified in such contemporary forms of spirituality” (Carrette and King 2005:85).

Carrette and King, in emphasizing the social obligations intrinsic to many indigenous spiritual traditions, recall both Durkheim and Mauss. If religion and the sacred are products of sustained engagement with a certain collective or community—united by common belief, mythology, experience, language, et cetera—it stands to reason that the fragmentation of the community would necessarily lead to the fragmentation of the religion.60 On the other hand, if a formerly local, tribal, or inter-tribal religious system becomes transnational, affecting the life-worlds of communities around the world, what becomes of it then?61 How does a religion meet the needs of people so radically disparate from one another? How do different cultural communities use the language of shared practice to negotiate an exchange that will strengthen rather than weaken their individual and shared beliefs? Both Christianity and Islam are seen to use homogeneity to accomplish this purpose:

Preachers and imams both want us to be the same. Everything the same. Same god, same church, same prayer. The Orishas, they are different as we are different. It is better for the world that we are different. Why now would this god have created everyone differently if we were meant to be the same? (personal communication, September 2012)

Iṣa/Orisha, in contrast, embraces diversity as a source of narrative, ideological, and spiritual strength. Local spirits may be overshadowed by the major Orishas in the mixed pantheons of belief systems on both sides of the Atlantic, but they stand a greater chance of survival if some role can be found for them in both new and ongoing narratives of collective practice.

Iṣa/Orisha in the Diaspora is not necessarily in need of rescuing; there are many who actively promote the preservation of older and more traditional styles of worship, from Oyo Tunji in South Carolina to basement peristyles in Haitian communities in New York City. Unfortunately, the case in Nigeria is different. Nigeria is crippled by corruption, dysfunctional infrastructure, ethnic violence, and—since 2008—plagued by militant Islamist groups in the north and excessively brutal retaliations by the country’s own military. Nonetheless, Nigeria is racing towards modernity, funding scientific projects ranging from nanotechnology to innovations in sustainable agriculture. In an effort to compete, there is an implicit prioritization of intellectual resources that does not include the promotion of the country’s spiritual heritage. Indeed, that heritage is often perceived as backwards, steeped in ignorance, and obstructive to the pace of development. The dominant narrative of progress is at times dismissive or explicitly hostile towards indigenous religious traditions, but there are many advocates of Ifa/Orisha, in Nigeria and abroad, that recognize the value of a philosophical religion based on inclusivity, worldly spirituality, and an adaptable, diverse, and expansive mythology. Their stories, affirmations, and perspectives will continue to support communities that honor and invoke the Orishas; in return, the Orishas will lend themselves to as many stories as there are individuals to tell them.

One respondent said:

In the West, people no longer worship Zeus, Odin, or any of the old gods that people believed in. The same will happen here in Africa. No one will worship Ogun or Shango anymore. Just like no one believes that it is Zeus who hursts lightning bolts, no one will believe that Shoponna causes smallpox or HIV. (personal communication, February 2013)

An initiate replied:

It is true that we are now informed as to the causes of things. But, the spirits hide themselves behind the causes of things. It is Ogun in the heart of a man who defends his people. It is Esu hidden behind the circumstances that cause a bridge to collapse when a cursed man walks over it. The world comes alive when you believe. It is only a dead thing, filled with suffering, when you interpret it mechanically. (personal communication, February 2013)
References


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