

Editorial: The Yoruba Religious System

This issue of Africa Update focuses on Yoruba religion. Professor Ade Dopamu, Professor of Religion at Moi University, Kenya, elaborates on various theological issues associated with one of the world's most influential religions, for Yoruba religion claims no less than one hundred million believers worldwide. In Nigeria, the Republic of Benin, and Togo in West Africa as well as Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Guyanas, Jamaica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, St.Kitts, and St.Vincent, in the New World, are millions of adherents.

Dr. Dopamu discusses Santería and Candomblé, the Cuban and Brazilian manifestations of Yoruba religion. He points out that here the beliefs and organizational structure of the Yoruba religious system remain generally intact, even though they may incorporate other African roots and a veneer of Catholicism.

In Yoruba cosmology, Olodumare or Olorun is the Supreme Being whose supremacy is absolute. Olodumare is acknowledged by all divinities as unique and pre-eminent.

The divinities called orisha (orisa) are offspring of Olodumare and are believed to be ministers and functionaries in the universe.

Dopamu points out that among the orisas are Orisanla or Obatala, viewed by Brazilian followers as the son of Olodumare. Obatala is identified by Cuban followers as Our Lady of Mercy. The patron divinity of blacksmiths and metallurgists, soldiers, hunters and all those who work in iron and steel is Ogun. Sango or Shango represents the divinity of vengeance against theft, and other crimes and according to Dopamu, is more dreaded than other divinities. Shango is of special significance in several Caribbean countries.

Diedre Badejo's fascinating work, *Osun Seegesi, The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power and Femininity* (Africa World Press, 1997) elaborates on one of the most important orisas in Yoruba cosmology, Osun. Oya, Yemoja and Osun are all female divinities associated with rivers and waterways.

Uninformed observers fail to understand that natural phenomena are perceived as the abode of various apparitions and spirits and not themselves the objects of worship. Adherents try to appease the spirits and energy forces that reside in them. To consider the religion as a whole as "animist" is incorrect.

Yoruba cosmology consists not only of a Supreme Being and numerous divinities called orisa, but also a conglomeration of spirits, ancestral forces and psychic agencies. As with Japanese Shintoism, the ancestors or dead relatives are believed to continue existence after death. Dopamu points out that the ancestors and orisa are seen as important sources of inspiration and continue to bear their titles of relationship after death. They act as "intermediaries between their living descendants and the orisa." Psychic agents and agencies are seen as real. Forces of evil have to be confronted and counteracted by specialists such as a babalawo or onisegun.

We thank Dr. Dopamu for providing us with an illuminating analysis of important aspects of Yoruba theology and philosophy.

Gloria Emeagwali
Chief Editor

The Yoruba Religious System

by Dr. Ade Dopamu, Professor of Religion
Moi University, Kenya

Introduction

It is reported from Havana that the Roman Catholic Church claims that seventy per cent of Cuba's eleven-million people are Catholics.¹ This claim could easily be disputed in view of the pervasive influence of Afro-Caribbean religions in Cuba.

Just as in Brazil, many people in Cuba practise both Catholicism and Santería. Ms. Padron, 74-year-old retired seamstress is described as both a regular church goer and a Santería devotee. Like millions of Cubans, "she believes Santería does not prevent her from being a good Catholic"² It appears that the Catholic Church has admitted the admixture of Catholicism and Santería in Cuba when Cardinal Jaime Ortega affirmed that "Catholicism and Santería are not mutually exclusive" because the great majority of Santería believers baptize their children and feel Catholic, and they are never considered as though they belong to a separate religion.³

Thus, the Pope's visit to Cuba has highlighted the strong impact of Afro-Caribbean Religions in Cuba, if the visit did not belie the claim that Cuba was a Catholic country. At least, Natalia Bolivar, an expert on Afro-Cuban religions, states that eighty percent of Cubans are believers, even if only sporadically, in Afro-Cuban religions.⁴ However, the intermingling of Catholicism and Afro-Caribbean religions has a long history.

The millions of enslaved Africans that were carried across the Atlantic did not leave their culture behind and they were able to preserve this even under the dehumanising conditions in which they found themselves. The most important aspect of their culture that has left an indelible mark on the New World, and that which continues to be predominant today, is African Religion (Afrel).⁵ Barrett is right when he says:

It was African traditional religion (sic), the motivating force of all African peoples, that was first to find expression in their land of bondage. The slave master was able to claim the body of the slave, but the world view of the African was nurtured in his soul and this soul was impregnable.⁶

Different aspects of Afrel survive today under different names and categories. Again, the different aspects may be traced to the conglomeration of culture forms that were brought by the different African peoples to the New World. For example, Pukkumina, the present form of Afrel in Jamaica, can be traced to the Akan of Ghana; Vodun (Voodoo) in Haiti has its roots among the Ewe-Fon of the Republic of Benin; Candomblé, in Brazil and Santería in Cuba have their origins in Yoruba religion.⁷

Santería

Santería is the religion that emerged in Cuban slave society of Yoruba origin.⁸ The Yoruba divinities were Candomblé transported to Cuba in their original form and many of them were seen with a veneer of Catholicism. The divinities were identified with Roman Catholic saints. The name Santería came from Spanish and it means "the way of the saints."⁹

The believer is a santero (man) or a santera (woman) and has to go through costly initiation before becoming a full member. The beliefs and practices are similar to those of Yoruba religion. Divination, sacrifice, spirit possession, initiation, belief in psychic phenomena, priesthood and other Yoruba systems of worship are prevalent in Santería.¹⁰ The spelling of Yoruba words are close to their original spelling and the foods offered to the divinities are of Yoruba derivation. The divinities are called orishas in their Yoruba generic name. It will be clear below how enduring the religion of the Yoruba has been and how the fundamental perspectives of this religion, as well as the Yoruba world view, has been retained in Santería.

Candomblé

Candomblé, is the religion that originated among the enslaved Yoruba of Brazil. It is now practised mainly in northern Brazil.¹¹ As in Santería, there is a predominance of an original Yoruba model for this religion.¹² Most of the practices are identical with the practices in Yoruba religion. Beliefs and organizational structures are patterned after those of the Yoruba, and the divinities speak through mediums.¹³

However, the Yoruba words are spelt differently from their original spellings probably as a result of Portuguese influence. In the same vein, the saints identified with the divinities are different from those of Santería. Again, Candomblé, identifies with other African roots. In the words of Eliade:

Candomblé, presents internal differences because of its various "nations:" Keto, Angola. . .and so forth - which are names given in Brazil to the African tribes in which specific beliefs and practices are thought to have originated.¹⁴ Even with these internal differences, the preponderance of Yoruba elements in Candomblé, identifies it with Yoruba religion. Candomblé, like Santería, attests to the continuity of Yoruba Religion in the midst of change.

Yoruba Religion

The monumental work of Idowa on Yoruba religion has continued to be a major reference work.¹⁵ Again, satisfactory groundwork has been done by many other scholars of anthropology, sociology, theology, philosophy, history, comparative religion and others. In this circumstance, it is not always necessary to reinvent the wheel. We shall, therefore, draw liberally but critically from these scholars, including our own works. Although many will find some aspects of this paper to be familiar, we should re-iterate that we are not wheeling out the familiar arguments of previous scholars unguardedly. The discussion in this paper is intended primarily to state some of the aspects of Yoruba religion that have survived in Santería and Candomblé. We should also point out that it is almost impossible to summarise Yoruba religion in a short paper such as this. Consequently, we intend simply to examine the fundamental elements of the religion, especially those that have survived in the diaspora.

The situation in Yoruba religion is a near representative of the situation in the whole of Africa when the elements of Afrel come into sharp focus. In many parts of Africa, there is a belief in a Supreme Being with varying degrees and emphasis. Again, in some parts of Africa, as in Sierra Leone and Central Africa, the divinities are almost absent, and ancestors are predominantly pre-eminent, whereas in some other parts, such most of West Africa, the situation changes and the divinities are more pronounced.¹⁶ Also, the incidence of psychic phenomena is more noticeable in some areas than others, and the same goes for the practice of magic and medicine, including divination. However, all these phenomena are found among the Yoruba as we shall develop below.

In view of the above, we should state immediately that some of the central issues in Yoruba religion can be understood in terms of five fundamental beliefs or basic themes which Idowu has described as the structure of Afrel.¹⁷ These include belief in God; belief in divinities; belief in spirits; belief in ancestors; belief in mysterious

powers.¹⁸ The scholars who have continued to be concerned with this position are many, and they are not nervous, but confident in putting forward their views. It is in this broad objective approach that we turn to the fundamental beliefs in Yoruba religion.

(i) The Supreme Being

The Yoruba name for the Supreme Being is Olorun or Olodumare. The first name, Olorun, translates easily to mean "the Owner of heaven" or the "Lord of heaven."¹⁹ This depicts God as the Author of all things, visible and invisible, the Head or Overlord of all in heaven and on earth."²⁰ Because the name is associated with orun (heaven, sky) some scholars have erroneously concluded that God is distant and remote. Indeed, the name Olorun is constantly found on the lips of the Yoruba and it is used in greetings: "Have you risen well?" "I thank God." It is found in ejaculatory prayers: "May God take care of us throughout the night;" "Deliver me, O Olorun!"²¹ The name is also commonly used in sayings and proverbs: "It is Olorun, the King, who pours down the rain in regular flow;" "Olorun's works are mighty;" "Only Olorun is wise;" "Whatever do you do in concealment that Olorun's eyes do not reach?;" "He is under the judgment of Olorun."²²

The popular use of Olorun for the Supreme Being made it attractive and acceptable to Islam and Christianity, and the name has been used successfully in evangelism. It is wrong to suggest that "this idea of God was borrowed from Muslims or Christians. . . The new religions adopt and enrich the name of God, but do not introduce it as something new."²³ The name even appears in many Yoruba incantations (ofò), a fact that attests to its being indigenous to the Yoruba. The following excerpt will suffice:

Odun sare, odun ko bodun;

Osu po sese, osu ko bosu;

Omode pantete ori;

Ko bOlorun oba.

Year runs after year,

but one does not overtake the other;

Month trots along,

but it cannot overtake another month;

A child balances his head,

But he cannot reach Olorun the King.

The second name, Olodumare, is an ancient one, and perhaps a more mysterious name for God. The name Olodumare is not as fully self-explanatory as the name Olorun. Idowu admits that the etymology of the second part of the name (MARE) "has been a subject of much guess-work and debate."²⁴ That may be responsible for the distorted story quoted by Magesa in trying to find the "origin of Olodumare."²⁵ Idowu himself categorically states, "It appears to be the Yoruba way of explaining the rainbow rather than explaining Olodumare."²⁶ In Yoruba theology, it is clearly stated that no one knows the antecedent or beginning of Olodumare. His immortality and eternity have never been doubted.²⁷ Whatever etymological connotation has come out of scholars' analysis, the full meaning of Olodumare appears to be "The King unique who holds the sceptre, wields authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth, and He is at the same time permanent, unchanging and reliable."²⁸ We want to quote with approval Idowu's summary on Yoruba belief:

Yoruba theology emphasises the unique status of Olodumare. He is supreme over all on earth and in heaven, acknowledged by all the divinities as the Head to whom all authority belongs and all allegiance is due. . . His status of supremacy is absolute. Things happen when He approves, things do not come to pass if He disapproves. In worship, the Yoruba holds Him ultimately First and Last; in man's daily life, He has the ultimate pre-eminence.²⁹

Idowu's last observation deserves some comment. It is generally believed that there are no priests of Olorun, no temples, no shrines and no communal prayers. This attitude to the Supreme Being in matters of worship has survived in Santería and Candomblé, where "Olorun, the creator of all being, is not revered directly but relations with him are mediated by the ORISHAS, who speak through mediums in the context of ecstatic religious practices."³⁰ As Sturm knew, the Yoruba designation Olorun is seldom encountered in Afro-Brazilian religion.³¹ When it does, it is easily identified with the idea of the Christian Creator who works primarily through his son, Jesus Christ. In Afro-Brazilian religion, therefore, Olorun "does not interfere directly in natural events and history but works through a host of intermediaries, the orixas."³²

Space will not allow us to write at length on the Yoruba theology that gives expression to this attitude to the Supreme Being. We have seen, however, that there are personal and private ejaculatory prayers to Olorun. Let it suffice to mention here that there is a sense in which there is, at least potentially, the worship of Olorun in the worship of the Orisha (divinities). Most African scholars of Afrel have maintained this view, and E. B. Idowu has persuasively argued that the divinities are the ministers of Olodumare.³³ "People, therefore, regard them as the convenient and appropriate channels through which they can reverence the exaltedness of the Almighty."³⁴ We shall return to this later.

We need to add that there are other names and attributes of Olorun which our limited space will not allow us to examine in detail. Such are Oluwa (Lord), Eleda (Creator), Olofin-Orun (King of heaven), Orise (the source of all things) and Oba-Orun (The king who dwells in the heavens). There is no evidence yet that these other names and attributes survive in Santería and Candomblé,

(ii) The Divinities

In Yoruba religion, the divinities are called Orisa (Orisha- Santería; orixa- Candomblé). It is generally believed that the divinities have the attributes or qualities or characteristics of the Supreme Being, and they are in consequence, offsprings of God. According to Yoruba theology, they were brought forth by Olodumare to serve as ministers and functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe.³⁶ The divinities are many, and their number varies between 201, 401, 600, and 1,700. They have their shrines, temples, devotees, priests and priestesses, and they are offered worship and receive day-to-day sacrifices.³⁷ Technically they are, according to Yoruba theology, intermediaries between God and man.

Two Yoruba words need explanation here. The Yoruba use the words *sin* (to serve), *isin* or *esin* (service) to refer to religious worship where God is meant. A person can say: *Mo sin Olorun* (I serve God); *Mo fi sin Olorun* (I do it in the service of God). They also use the word *bo*, (to sacrifice, offering, adulation) for divinities, spirits, ancestors or man's double in the following ways: *O bo orisa* (He worshipped the divinity); *O fi agutan sebo* (He offered a sheep as sacrifice).

Similarly, the following words are used in relation to divinities only: *aborisa* (worshipper of divinity), *abogun* (worshipper or priest of Ogun, the divinity of iron), *iborisa* (the act of worshipping a divinity), *aboke* (the worshipper or priest of the hill spirit), *abore* (the priest of a divinity) *orisa akunlebo* (the divinity worshipped by kneeling).

In all these examples, you do not *bo* (offer sacrifice to) God, rather, you *sin* (serve) God. But you *bo* (offer sacrifices to) the divinities who in turn are responsible to God. In Yoruba religion, therefore, *bo* (to offer sacrifice) and *ebo* (sacrifice) are not used in relation to Olorun, rather, they are used in relation to *orisa*. It is not correct to say: *Mo bo Olorun* (I offer sacrifice to Olorun) but it is correct to say: *Mo bo orisa* (I offered sacrifice to *orisa*).

Additionally, the priest is dedicated to *orisa* and not to Olorun. The following words are used of the priest: *aworo*, *olorisa*, *aborisa*, *babalorisa* (male) *iyalorisa* (female), *aboke*, *abore*, *abogun*, *babalawo* (male), *onifa*. We do not say: *abOlorun* or *abOlodumare* (the priest of God). It does not sound as a correct or proper usage. But since the priest is the official servant of *orisa*, he both *sin* (serve) and *bo* (offer sacrifice to) him. In Yoruba theology, whatever he does to *orisa* is by extension done to Olorun to whom the *orisa* are responsible.

The truth is that the Yoruba have brought sociological interpretation to theological thinking. Within the traditional Yoruba society, fathers are expected to take care of their children without expecting any gifts or maintenance from the children. Olorun is to the Yoruba as fathers are to their children. A note by Modupe Oduyoye is a useful way of demonstrating the Yoruba attitude to the Supreme Being in matters of worship. He states:

Olorun is so all-sufficient psychologically and materially that he does not need man either to *bo* (adulate) him or to *bo* (feed) him. . . Fathers demand service, shrug off adulation as too sentimental and pray never to have to be fed by their children. It is not because Olorun is too remote that no sacrifice is offered to him.³⁸

Like fathers, Olorun takes care of man, gives him gifts and maintains him. He, therefore, demands service from man. In this regard, thanks are profusely given to Olorun in personal and private ejaculations, in theophoric personal names - *Olorunfemi* (God loves me), *Iseoluwa* (the works of God), *Oluseun* (God has done great things), *Opeolu*

(Gratitude to God), Tolutope (God's ways demand thankfulness), Tolulope (to God be thanks), Olorunyomi (God has saved me) and in spontaneous prayers and expression of joy.

It appears, however, that when Islam and Christianity adopted the Yoruba names of God, they also adopted for God the actions of people to their orisa. These actions are also used in the translation of the Bible to Yoruba. For example, O ru ebo si Olorun Isaac baba re (He offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac); ebo sisun (burnt offering); Iwo yoo sin Olorun lori oke yi (You shall serve God upon this mountain). There is a Yoruba Christian song thus:

Tewo gbore wa,

Baba wa tewo gbore wa;

Baba Olodumare,

Iwo la wa rubo si o;

Tewo gbore wa,

Baba wa tewo.

Accept our offering,

O Father, accept our offering;

Our Father, Olodumare,

To you we offer our sacrifice;

Accept our offering,

O Father, accept it.

We have elaborated this point because it is a fundamental issue in Yoruba Religion and one over which there has been a considerable amount of argument and misunderstanding and confusion. It should not surprise any investigators, therefore, that the orisa have a place of prominence in Santería and Candomblé. Space constraints will not allow us to indulge in details, but we shall now proceed to briefly look at representative divinities and the saints with which they are identified.³⁹

Orisa-nla or Obatala

He is the Yoruba arch-divinity who was commissioned by God to create the solid earth, equip it, and mould the physical form of man. Orisa-nla is often described as the deputy or the vice-gerent or son of Olodumare. He represents creative and procreative forces and is therefore very popular. Barren women usually take their petition to him so that they may be blessed with children. In Santería, he is Obatala and identified with Our Lady of Mercy, but in Candomblé, (Oxalá), he is identified with Jesus Christ. Just as in Yoruba Religion, white is the colour of Orisa-nla.

Orunmila or Ifa

Orunmila is the oracle divinity of Yorubaland. He is the deputy of Olodumare in matters of wisdom, prognostication and foreknowledge. People consult Orunmila on all occasions for guidance and solutions to problems, and he is worshipped everywhere in Yorubaland. He is Ifa or Orunmila in Santería and is linked with Saint Francis of Assisi.

Ogun

Ogun is the god of iron, of war and of the chase. He is pre-eminently the patron divinity of blacksmiths, hunters, warriors, drivers and all who deal in iron and steel. His devotees worship him for his benevolence. He is equated with Saint John the Baptist in Santería, but with Saint George in Candomblé, (Ogum). Ogun is also associated with justice and God's wrath.

Sango

Sango is the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning. He represents the divine wrath upon the children of disobedience. There are various legends about Sango being an ancient king of Oyo. He was deified after his death. He is more dreaded than any other divinity for his malevolence. He forbids and punishes lying, stealing, poisoning and other crimes. Punishments by Sango are royal punishments, the victim must not be mourned. The victims can only be

buried by priests of Sango. In Santería (Shango) he is identified with Saint Barbara, while in Candomblé, (Xango) he is identified with Saint Jerome and Saint John the Baptist.

Sopona or Obaluwaye

Sopona is the divinity of the disease of smallpox. He is dreaded in that he manifests the wrath of God, and he punishes offenders with smallpox. His punishment must be accepted with cheerfulness, joy, gratitude and without complaint or mourning. The property of a victim is confiscated by the priests who only have the right to bury him/her. In Santería, he is called Shakpana or Babaluyiye and is identified with Saint Lazarus. He is called Omolu or Obalua, in Candomblé, and is also identified with Saint Lazarus. We should note that there is an important divinity among the Egba in Abeokuta called Buruku. This divinity is also known as Omolu. It is believed that he is responsible for many of the human miseries and adversities such as death, illness, destruction and other misfortunes. It is not clear whether it is this Omolu that has been given expression in Obalua,, possibly by enslaved Africans of Egba origin.

Osun

Osun is the goddess of river Osun which flows through the town of Osogbo in Yorubaland where she is actively worshipped. Osun is noted for her benevolence. She is called the mother of children and barren women usually approach her through her priests and priestesses. Such women are given water from Osun shrine or river to drink. Besides the gifts of children, Osun also confers on people material blessing as well as total well-being. In Santería, Osun is identified with the Virgin of Cobre while in Candomblé, (Oxum), she is associated with Saint Catherine or Our Lady of Glory or Lady of Candlemas.

Oya

Oya is the goddess of the River Niger. It is believed that she was the first and the beloved wife of Sango. Oya is worshipped in many parts of Yorubaland, mostly for children by women. Tornadoes are attributed to Oya when she is angry. In Santería, Oya is equated with Saint Teresita, and in Candomblé, she is called Iansa.

Yemoja

Yemoja is the goddess of rivers and streams in consequence of which she is called the "mother of all rivers." She is thus the personification of "waters of life" or "living waters" by which flowing streams become sources of life. Yemoja, therefore, is propitiated for children and for wealth. She is identified with the Virgin of Regla (Santería-Yemaja) and with Our Lady of the Conception (Candomblé, -Iemanjá).

Esu or Elegbara

Esu is the trickster deity of the Yoruba. He is regarded as a divinity of mischief who can make things difficult for mankind and divinities.

He is malicious and a mischief maker, quite capable of causing confusion, bringing about complicated situations or promoting malice among people . . . There is an unmistakable element of evil in Esu and for that reason he has been predominantly associated with things evil. . . It is quite clear still that Yoruba put almost every evil tendency and practice in man down to his agency. . . From all accounts he is not only a bewilderingly versatile character but also extremely capricious. . . he is an elusive, slippery character whom it is not easy to fix.⁴⁰

Although Esu is worshipped also because the Yoruba have faith in his protective and benevolent capabilities, it is the preponderance of evil associated with him that has led some scholars to equate him with either the Devil or Satan. Those who have objections give no proof other than the fact that he is worshipped. But the fact is that the Yoruba themselves do not pray to have dealings with Esu. What they do in terms of sacrifice is to avoid or elude his wickedness, callousness and devilish atrocious plans. The Yoruba say: Bi a ba rubo, ki a mu tEsu kuro (When sacrifices are offered, the portion which belongs to Esu should be set aside for him). He is generally described as buruku (bad, malevolent).

Even though Esu is undoubtedly one of the principal Yoruba divinities, he is technically not an orixa in Afro-Brazilian Cults. It is interesting to note that unlike other Yoruba divinities, he has no priests and priestesses dedicated to him. When we say Eleegun, Onisango, Olosanyin, Elerinle, Ologun, Onifa, Olosun, Oloya, Olobatala, we understand these to mean either the priests or priestesses or devotees of the various orisa. But when we say eleesu we mean something negative, and definitely a devilish person. Again, there are no known universal festivals in honour of Esu as we have for other divinities. People will be taken aback if it is announced in any Yoruba town or village that they are going to celebrate odun Esu (the festival of Esu). We should note here that we do not also hear of odun Olorum (the festival of Olorun) since all that we do for the orisa are indirectly done for Olorun. The isolated festival of Esu in Ile-Oluji mentioned by Idowu is clearly a strange and an improbable one because it is to mark the beginning of annual cultivation of the land. The portfolio of agriculture and farming belongs to a different divinity, except that in the process of celebrating the festival of agriculture the people may propitiate Esu "that all may be well with the farmer's work throughout the year."⁴¹ Furthermore, there are no distinct devotees of Esu since everybody propitiates him to remove or avoid his malevolence. His shrine can be anywhere, his emblems are

various, and he has over two hundred names, all suggesting implausibility of real goodness. This belief has survived in Candomblé, where the tendency "has been to think of him as a predominantly evil force rather than amoral, and he is identified in the popular mind with the devil. Satanic horns and tail are sometimes used in representations of Exu."⁴² In Santería, he (Elegba) is identified with Saint Peter.

Osanyin

Osanyin is the Yoruba divinity of magic and medicine. He is regarded as a great physician as well as a great magician.⁴³ He knows what can be done to heal, or to procure what cannot be done through ordinary means. At the same time, he is an object of worship since magicians and medicine-men usually have his shrine in their homes. He is still a prominent orisa in the diaspora where "he has become interpreted as the force of medicinal plants and is known for his skill in healing and magical practices."⁴⁴ In Santería, he is identified with Saint Raphael, but in Candomblé, (Oxossi) he is identified with Saint Sabastian.

Erinle

Erinle is a riverine divinity. Even though he is worshipped in most of Yorubaland, his worship is predominant in Ilobu in Osun State where there is an annual festival in his honor. Traditions say he was a poor hunter who drowned in the river that was named after him. Names for his devotees include: Omiyale (water has turned aside into the house), Omitoogun (water is as powerful as medicine), Omisina (water has opened the way) and Omideyi (water has become this). Because of the tradition that Erinle was a hunter he has been associated with medicine in Santería and identified with Saint Michael.

Ibeji

Ibeji is the deity of twins. Among the Yoruba, twins are regarded as special creations or "spirits" and they are revered. Periodical sacrifices are made on their behalf to make the spirits happy. These consist of beans, red palm-oil and vegetables. In Santería, it is thought that the Ibeji behave like young children and they are therefore the counterparts of the twin Saints Cosmas and Damian. The same identification has taken place in Candomblé. It has become necessary to examine the above orisa because they appear to "enjoy universal popularity and are conceded to be the most powerful."⁴⁵ No scholar of Santería or Candomblé, would fail to recognise these orisa which are a reflection of the Yoruba Religion past, present and future. All other beliefs and practices that are not directly associated with Olorun hinge upon the orisa. "The basis of Santería is the development of a deep personal relationship with the orishas, a relationship that will bring the santero worldly success and heavenly wisdom."⁴⁶

(iii) The Spirits

Spirits are believed to be apparitional entities which form a separate category of beings from divinities and ancestors. The Yoruba regard them as powers which are almost abstract entities that take on human shape. They are usually associated with natural phenomena like trees, rocks, rivers, lagoons, forests, bushes, hills, earth, mountains, winds, dark groves and unusual places, and these become their abode. These spirits may even inhabit animals or birds or snakes. Such objects as they inhabit are regarded as having certain mysterious powers and they may become the emblems of the spirits. The objects may be used in the preparation of magic and medicine in the belief that they possess magical significance because of the spirits residing in them.⁴⁷

The spirits come under various names such as Ajija or Aja (spirit of whirlwind with knowledge of the use of herbs), Aroni (a spirit with one leg that teaches the use of herbs), Egberé (a smallish elf that carries a small mat and weeps all the time), oro (spirits of trees), eborá, iwín (a fairy believed to live in the ground, rock, forest or hill). The actual position of these spirits in Santería and Candomblé, requires further investigation. But among the Yoruba, they have real existence and they can be good or bad, beneficent or malevolent. Consequently, they are propitiated out of fear. They neither have priests nor festivals like the divinities and they assume no universal worship. That may explain why they do not command much attention in the diaspora.

(iv) The Ancestors

The ancestors are the dead parents of the family. It is believed that they continue existence in the world beyond as spirits. It is also believed that these ancestors still have a keen interest in the welfare of their families, and they are therefore spiritual superintendents of family affairs. Consequently, they continue to bear their titles of relationship like baba (father) or iya (mother) or baba-nlá (grandfather). Communion and communication can still be made between them and those who are alive here on earth. There are communal ceremonies in honor of the ancestors. Certain cults like Oro, Egungun, Agemo, Geledé and Adamu-Orisa are dedicated to the worship of ancestral spirits. As in orisa, people heavily depend on the ancestors in all aspects of life and they serve as a source and guarantee of the life of the family. They are believed to be able to influence living members of the family for good or evil, but their influence does not extend beyond their specific families!

In short, they act as intermediaries between their living descendants and the orisa or Olorun.

The ancestors, together with the orisa, played important roles in the emancipation of enslaved Africans in the New World. Today, "in addition to orixas . . . Afro-Brazilian cults work actively with ancestral spirits. . . The terms of address are familiar: Pai (Father) and Mae (Mother), and less frequently Tio (Uncle) and Tia (Aunt)."⁴⁸

(v) **Mysterious Powers**

The Yoruba have strong belief in mysterious powers which are oogun, egbogi or isegun (magic, medicine), oso, oogun ika or oogun buburu (sorcery, bad magic) and aje, eye, osonga (witchcraft).

Magic and medicine have the same name because in practice, they are very close. They are based on the belief that natural objects have occult, mysterious, supernatural qualities that can be tapped for the benefit of man. When these qualities are used in the area of therapy, for curing diseases or for treating the sick or for the prevention of diseases, they are called medicine.⁴⁹ Medicine, therefore, is both prophylactic and therapeutic (preventive and curative). But when these qualities are used for non-therapeutic needs of man such as passing an examination, aiding memory (isoye), attracting customers (afero), protecting one from bad magic (madarikan), bringing good luck (awure) and influencing litigation (aforan), they are magic. The Yoruba do not have any confusion in using the words for their practice. For example, they know what it is when they say either madarikan (magic that protects one from sorcery) or jedijedi (medicine for curing dysentery). It is only when we use!

the terms magic or medicine to express Yoruba concepts that we introduce confusion. We should, however, note that the goals, purpose, result, or intention of the practice normally shows whether a particular procedure is magic or medicine.

Sorcery is the use of bad or evil magic to kill or harm people, or to cause misfortune to people or the society. This use can be out of spite or to avenge a wrong done. Some types of sorcery include abilu (evil magic that brings a drastic change in the fortune of a person), apeta (invocation shooting), efun (evil magic that makes a person behave abnormally), isasi (evil magic that makes a person act as one who is insane).

Witchcraft is the utilization of certain inherent psychic power in people to cause harm or havoc to people or property. It is a will-power, emanating from within people, for the purpose of achieving evil ends without the use of any tangible apparatus. In Yorubaland, witches (aje) are usually believed to be women.

Both sorcery and witchcraft are regarded as a reality among the Yoruba. They are usually regarded as forces of evil and used as explanations of social tensions and misfortunes in the society. People usually consult a babalawo (diviner) or onisegun, oloogun, elegbogi (magician, medicine-man,) for assistance and protection.

It is significant to note that these mysterious powers played a prominent role in fighting the slave masters.

According to Barrett:

The flora of the Caribbean provided the Africans with an abundance of herbs which were well known to them from Africa. They knew the properties of each herb first hand, and with their knowledge the unsuspecting master was easy prey.⁵⁰

Barrett goes on to quote Sir Spencer St. John, the British Ambassador to Haiti in the nineteenth century, who stated that he knew of many victims who retired to their beds in sound mind to awaken as idiots and remain in that state despite the aid of science.⁵¹ Santería

Today, belief in and the utilization of mysterious powers feature prominently in Santería and Candomblé. "Santería serves as a means for resolving the problems of everyday life, including problems of health, money and love.

Divination can reveal the sources of these problems, and it points the way to their resolution."⁵²

Conclusion

So far, we have seen that most of the practices in Santería and Candomblé, have their roots in Yoruba Religion. We have also seen that these practices are waxing stronger in the diaspora and the people's belief in and dependence on the orisa are sustaining these religions. The world-view of the Yoruba has given expression to Santería and Candomblé, and the need to solve human problems and cater for human needs, gives the religions a wide appeal.

NOTES

¹ Frances Kerry, "Papal tour eagerly awaited," in Daily Nation, Friday, January 16, 1998, p. 11.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "African religion" is now gaining currency as the name for indigenous religion of Africa, and scholars like J. S. Mbiti and Laurenti Megasa have used it as the title of their recent works. The present writer in most of his writings since 1980 has consistently used the term "African religion" from which he has coined "Afrel" as its acronym and "Afrelists" as the adherents. See John S. Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, 2nd Edition (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1992), and Laurenti Magesa, African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life (New York, Orbit Books, 1997).

- ⁶ Leonard Barrett, "African Religion in the Americas: The Islands in Between," in Newell S. Booth, Jr. (ed.), African Religions: A Symposium, (New York, NOK Publishers, 1977), p. 184.
- ⁷ Ibid., pp. 191-207.
- ⁸ Michael Pye, Macmillan Dictionary of Religion, (London, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994), p. 237.
- ⁹ Mircea Eliade, The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol.13, (New York, Macmillan Publishing Company , 1987), p. 66.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Michael Pye, op.cit., p. 41.
- ¹² Mircea Eliade, op.cit., Vol. 1, p. 103.
- ¹³ Michael Pye, op. cit., p. 41.
- ¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, op.cit., Vol. 1, p. 104.
- ¹⁵ E. Bolaji Idowu, Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief (London, Longman, 1962).
- ¹⁶ E. G. Parrinder, African Traditional Religion (London, S.P.C.K, 1968) , p. 43.
- ¹⁷ E. B. Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1973), p. 139.
- ¹⁸ J. O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, West African Traditional Religion (Ibadan, Onibonaje Press and Book Industries [NIG] Ltd, 1979), pp. 34, 240.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 37.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 39.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 122.
- ²² E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, op.cit., pp. 39ff.
- ²³ E. G. Parrinder , op.cit. , p. 34.
- ²⁴ E. B. Idowu, Olodumare , op. cit., p. 33.
- ²⁵ Laurenti Magesa, op.cit., p. 41.
- ²⁶ E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, op.cit. , p. 35.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 46.
- ²⁸ J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, op. cit., p. 38ff.
- ²⁹ E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, op.cit., p. 56.
- ³⁰ Michael Pye , op. cit., p. 41.
- ³¹ Fred Gillette Sturm, "Afro - Brazilian Cults," in Newell S. Booth, Jr. (ed.) op. cit., p. 223.
- ³² Ibid., p. 46.
- ³³ E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, op. cit., pp. 62ff.
- ³⁴ P. A. Dopamu, "Towards Understanding African Traditional Religion," in I. A. B. Balogun (ed.), Religious Understanding and Cooperation in Nigeria (Ilorin, Government Press, 1978), pp. 115ff.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, op. cit., pp. 62ff.
- ³⁷ P. A. Dopamu, "African Concept of God," in S. U. Erivwo et.al. (eds.), God, Man and Judgement (Ilorin, Matanmi and Sons Printing and Publishing Company, Ltd., 1981), p. 38.
- ³⁸ Modupe Oduyoye , "NOTES on 'Olorun and Orisa,'" in E. A. Ade Adegbola (ed.), Traditional Religion in West Africa (Ibadan, Daystar Press, 1983), p. 363.
- ³⁹ For details, see J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, op. cit., pp. 78-91; Fred Gillette Sturm, op.cit., pp. 222ff; Mircea Eliade, op. cit., Vols 1, 3, 13.
- ⁴⁰ E. B. Idowu Olodumare, op. cit., pp. 80-85. See also P. A. Dopamu, Esu: The Invisible Foe of Man (Ijebu - Ode , Shebiotimo Publications, 1986), pp. 8-25; and P. A Dopamu , Exu: Invisivel Do Homen (Sao Paulo, Brazil, Editora Oduduwa, Ltd. ,1990).
- ⁴¹ E. B. Idowu, ibid., p. 84.
- ⁴² Fred Gillette Sturm , op. cit., p. 224.
- ⁴³ P. A. Dopamu, The Practice of Magic and Medicine in Yoruba Traditional Religion (University of Ibadan, Ph.D Thesis , 1977) , p. 87, pp 124-129.
- ⁴⁴ Fred Gillette Sturm, op. cit., p. 223.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Mircea Eliade, op. cit., Vol. 13, p. 66.
- ⁴⁷ P. A. Dopamu, The Practice of Magic and Medicine, op. cit., pp. 103ff.
- ⁴⁸ Fred Gillette Sturm, op. cit., p. 225.
- ⁴⁹ P. A. Dopamu, "Traditional Medicine with Particular Reference to Yoruba of Western Nigeria," in Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali (ed.), African Systems of Science, Technology and Art: The Nigerian Experience, (London, Karnak House, 1993), p. 44.
- ⁵⁰ Leonard Barrett, op. cit., p. 188.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Mircea Eliade, Vol. 13, p. 66.

The ancient Yoruba religious system has a pantheon of deities who underpin an extensive system of cults. Rituals are focused on the explanation, prediction, and control of mystical power. Formerly, religious beliefs were diffused widely by itinerant priests whose divinatory practices, in the form of verses, myths, and morality tales, were sufficiently standardized to constitute a kind of oral scripture. Religious Practitioners. Priests and priestesses exercised considerable influence in precolonial times. They were responsible for divining, curing, maintaining peace and harmony, administering war magic, and organizing extensive rites and festivals. Many duties of political and religious authorities overlapped. Ceremonies. Rituals are performed largely to appease or gain favor. The Yoruba religion, comprising the traditional religious concepts and practices of the Yoruba people, is found primarily in southwestern Nigeria and the adjoining parts of Benin, and Togo, commonly known as Yorubaland. Yoruba religion is ancestral or partially ancestral to the Afro-American religions Santería, Trinidad Orisha, Umbanda, Brujería, Hoodoo, Candomblé, Quimbanda, Orisha, Xangô de Recife, Xangô do Nordeste, Comfa, Espiritismo, Santo Daime, Candomblé, Abakuá, Kumina, Winti, Sanse, Cuban Vodún, Dominican Vodún, Louisiana Voodoo, Haitian Vodou, and Vodun.[1] Yoruba religious beliefs are... In the Yoruba belief system, Olodumare has ase over all that is, and hence is considered Nigerian studies : or the religious and political system of the Yoruba. by. Dennett, R. E. (Richard Edward), 1857-1921.