

# ORISA

YORUBA GODS

and *Spiritual Identity*

in *Africa and the Diaspora*

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Africa World Press, Inc.

P.O. Box 1892  
Trenton, NJ 08607



P.O. Box 48  
Asmara, ERITREA

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First Printing 2005

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Book and Cover design: Sam Saverance

Cover Image: Egungun of Ile Aina Olomo; photograph by Duane Johnson

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Orisa : Yoruba gods and spiritual identity in Africa and the diaspora  
/ Toyin Falola and Ann Genova, editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-59221-373-1 (hardcover) -- ISBN 1-59221-374-X (pbk.)

1. Yoruba (African people)--Religion--Congresses. 2. Orishas  
--Congresses. I. Falola, Toyin. II. Genova, Ann.

BL2480.Y6O76 2006

299.6'8333--dc22

2005018850





YORUBA DIASPORIC  
PERFORMANCE:  
THE CASE FOR A SPIRITUALLY  
— AND AESTHETICALLY — BASED  
DIASPORA<sup>1</sup>

Joni L. Jones

*Ile-Ife oodaye ibi ojumo ti n mo wa.*

*Ile-Ife, the place of creation, where the day dawns.<sup>2</sup>*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Two groups were told to make ebo of the cotton plant in order to win a war.  
The group that did not make the ebo was scattered around the earth  
like the seeds of the cotton plant.<sup>3</sup>*

Yorubaland of southwestern Nigeria has yielded a vibrant diaspora that has extended and re-imagined Yoruba spirituality to suit the particular regions where New World Yoruba resides. This flourishing reconstitution of Yoruba, particularly in the U.S., the Caribbean, and South America, marks the simultaneous development of distinctive Yoruba spiritual practices along with the acknowledgment of a West African Yoruba root.<sup>4</sup> In each region, people have mapped out a practice that responds to the specific sociopolitical realities they experience, to the natural world with which they live, and to the other cultures and peoples with whom they share time and space. The very concept of Ile-Ife as the place of creation signals the making of a diaspora. As suggested by the first epigraph that opens this essay, Yorubaland spawned new traditions in new locations, and like the dawning of a new day, these locations are ripe with potential.

Understanding Ile-Ife as the site of creation and subsequent dispersal opens the space for an examination of artistic creation as a primary artifact of the Yoruba diaspora; the relocation and adaptation of culture that characterizes a diaspora is clearly discernible in artistic production. Indeed, the aesthetics expressed through spiritual practice have served as a major conduit for spreading and perpetuating the Yoruba diaspora. This essay will examine the inclusion of orisa and resistance as two primary features of Yoruba diasporic performance by referencing three plays of the Yoruba diaspora: Shay Youngblood's African American *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, Pepe Carril's Cuban *Shango de Ima*, and Abdias do Nascimento's Brazilian *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns*.

Referencing these plays as a way of understanding a Yoruba diaspora reveals the ways in which Yoruba is less about a place and a people

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than it is about a base of knowledge, a set of similar cultural/spiritual experiences, and facility with spiritual rites.<sup>5</sup> Authenticity, then, might be fruitfully fashioned as what one knows and does, and not where one is from and what one's bloodline may be. The virtue in considering authenticity as embodied knowledge rather than as location and biological lineage is that this allows for the political and spiritual galvanizing of Yoruba around the world, thereby broadening and strengthening the very idea of Yorubanness. Refiguring authenticity as it relates to a Yoruba diaspora also avoids the essentializing impulses of earlier notions of an African diaspora that were based first on race, and later on identifiable cultural retentions. The Yoruba diaspora as I discuss it in this essay — as embodied knowledge dispersed around the world, primarily in the U.S., the Caribbean, and South America — complicates and challenges a Yoruba diaspora based on race, and thrives on the adaptation of spiritual rites rather than the identification of cultural retentions that anxiously trace back to a place of origin.

Admittedly, theorizing a Yoruba diaspora in this way is a controversial enterprise for two reasons. First, it calls for a shared sense of authority amongst those in Nigeria's Yorubaland and those in the Yoruba diaspora.<sup>6</sup> To adopt my idea of a Yoruba diaspora may initially seem to undermine the power of *Ile-Ife* and its origin; the intent, however, is to develop a relationship with Ile-Ife and all regions where Yoruba is practiced that allows for regional autonomy. This discussion has become so popular that online orisa websites frequently feature this debate. As New World Yoruba Efun Moyiwa states "Truth in this religion is not to be found exclusively in any one place any longer." Second, this theorizing also requires confrontation with the racial component of any African diaspora as it acknowledges that embodied knowledge is not racially coded; with this idea, Europeans could claim Yorubanness along with Nigerians if they acquired the lived experiences (including a visceral comprehension of racism) that make them proficient practitioners. This view of a diaspora has a kinship with Edmund T. Gordon's vision of a diaspora that is defined in terms of consciousness and identity rather than place of origin and bloodlines. For Gordon, an African diaspora consists of "The endurance of forms of racialized subordination, classification, and ideologies that circulate internationally, within and between nations of 'first' and 'third' worlds; and the creative efforts of people living through such systems to reformulate and reevaluate their own sense of self in confrontation with particular nationalisms and racisms" (13). From this perspective, to speak of a Yoruba diaspora is to accent the politics inherent in the deployment of the term.

It is not surprising that Yoruba diasporic aesthetics would be intimately linked with spirituality because Yoruba performance itself is linked to spirituality. Yoruba performance draws from a diverse continuum that



includes Dramatic Ritual, *Apidan* or *Alarinjo* Theatre, and Yoruba Popular Traveling Theatre. Spirituality is fundamental to dramatic ritual, which connects the material world with cosmic forces on the spiritual plane. The intent is to shift the ase, as all who are gathered contribute to the complex movement between *aiye* and *orun*. The deeply spiritual elements of some dramatic rituals are not available to the general public who may only experience the carnival-like celebrations of the rituals, and for whom the spiritual elements imbedded in the carnival are invisible. Some Yoruba theatre scholars argue that dramatic ritual was the springboard into Yoruba theatre, and cite an early use of *Egungun* masquerades to support this claim.<sup>7</sup> Yoruba theatre scholar Joel Adedeji explains that in about 1590, Alaafin Ogbolu, the fourth and final Yoruba ruler to reign in exile, wanted to return the seat of Yoruba government to Oyo. Ogbolu's council of elders did not want to move, and planned to trick the ruler into remaining in Igboho. The council required a group of *Egungun* masqueraders to scare off Ogbolu's emissaries by creating an otherworldly portrayal of the dead (Adedeji, 27). They used their skills from their spiritual work to create a make-believe reality, thus marking the transition from dramatic ritual and union with the theatrical world of pretend. It is at this moment that dramatic ritual spawned a new performance form in which pretending stood alongside being and believing.

This blend of ritual, aesthetics, and agency is the soil from which contemporary Yoruba diasporic performance is cultivated.

## CALLING THE ORISA

The orisa, cosmic forces that manifest around the world, are inherently diasporic. The wind, the river, the thunder, the oceans, the mountains, and the trees cover the planet and do not claim allegiance to a single source other than the impetus of the life force itself. In fact, the orisa want to adapt to each region's needs so they can extend their own power and reach. Given this natural global experience, it is not surprising that when Yoruba cosmology appears in Yoruba diasporic dramatic texts, the focus is often on the orisa. The art, then, is interplay between Yoruba cosmology and the sociopolitical and aesthetic realities of each region. In examining the orisa in these dramatic texts, it is clear how they manifest in various regions to do the work necessary in that locale. The Sango of Duro Ladipo's Nigerian *Oba Koso* is not the Shango of Pepe Carril's Cuban *Shango de Ima*; the life spark, intellectual strategizing, and passionate warrior spirit of Sango is specifically shaped to meet the particular needs of a postcolonial military regime in the one region, and the needs of a communist government beleaguered by U.S. economic sanctions in the other.

In Yoruba spiritual practice, to invoke the orisa one must enlist the acoustic power of sound and the kinetic power of movement. Each orisa

has its own sonic vibration that is stimulated through word, song, prayer, and *oriki*, and its own kinetic and visual resonance that is triggered by dance and symbolic/mimetic movement. These sounds and movements are designed to get the orisa's attention; without this attention the ceremony is spiritually bereft. Yoruba scholar Aina Olomo explains the importance of sound to Yoruba practice in this way:

Our total being is an antenna; although we listen through our ears we actually hear with our entire body. There are sounds, however, that do not pass through our ears. Some sounds ricochet from their source into our skin; they penetrate our inner worlds, where we receive and transmit messages, some consciously, and others unconsciously, some we decipher with our intuition. What we hear through our ears happens without any thought or intellectual contribution from us, but once we have heard, our inner world responds emotionally and psychically. We respond to the entire universe, alive with electro-magnetic currents that are constantly in motion, radiating unseen from the soil, sky, air, and from other beings, incarnated and unincarnated (55).

For this reason, sound is extremely important to Yoruba practice as it is used to invoke the orisa, to invite them to the earth plane as a sign of their blessing and support.

Calling the orisa requires using any means available to invigorate the ase. Spoken word, music, dance, *oriki*, drumming, and chanting are all employed as needed. The practitioners must use their own ase to call down the ase of the orisa. Doing so means not only using the appropriate sounds and visual stimuli, it also means creating the right environment through setting, time of day, herbs, and spiritual accoutrement. In his discussion of Yoruba ritual, theatre scholar Oyin Ogunba describes the "imaginative collaboration" (22) of the participants in ceremony. This necessary participation by humans and orisa alike cannot occur if the atmosphere has not been made ready. In this way the environment generated by the ase of the participants is the roux in which the experience simmers.

Shay Youngblood begins and ends *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* with a praise song for the divinity Yemonja, the energy of the ocean that holds both the world and human families intact. It is fitting to frame the play in this way because Daughter, the main character, spends the entire play paying homage to "the Big Mamas who raised me," and acquiring the skills necessary to live a secure adult life. In this way, Yemonja oversees the play surrounding Daughter and the audience with a sturdy mother love, a mother love necessary to combat the denigration of blackness and femaleness that is woven into U.S. life. Yemonja gives an urgently needed stability to those who have had to reroute the legacy of enslavement and its subsequent, varied oppressions.



The primary orisa of *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns* is Eshu (also spelled Estu), the holder of ase, the orisa of indeterminacy. Eshu watches as the main character makes one choice after another, each one plunging him more deeply into a racial self-hatred that Eshu understandably abhors. As the orisa who presents humans with options that test our character and cunning, it is fitting that Eshu figures prominently into the action of the play, and, along with Ogun, brings about Emanuel's final destruction. Along with Eshu, Oshun (also spelled Osun), Shango (also spelled Sango), and Yemonja appear in the play, often serving as a chorus pointing out the main character's transgressions to the audience. The play opens in the world of the orisa, and this world freely interacts with the world of humans throughout. The orisa provide the moral foundation for the play by establishing the social rules and by doling out punishment.

The orisa also exact punishment in *Shango de Ima* in which the impetuous Shango first badgers his mother for details about his absent father, then courts Oshun, Oya, Obba, and Yemonja, leaving each woman frustrated with his cavalier treatment. As punishment, Obatala—both judge and mother to Shango in this Cuban manifestation—decrees that humanity will now experience the joy of life only with the attendant decay of death. As with *Sortilege II*, songs, oriki, and dances permeate the text.

Each of these plays situates the orisa in foundational positions. The orisa are sung to and sung about; they are the governing principles in the plays, and characters variously dance, chant, or speak of the power of the orisa. In each work, calling the orisa is critical to the performance experience by establishing the texts' aesthetic core.

## RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL

Yoruba practitioners in the diaspora often experience their spirituality as a specifically counterhegemonic political strategy. This strategy manifests in several important ways, most of which reflect a warrior spirit that is essential for survival. In the diaspora, such a spirit was required in order to brace against oppression, to retain cultural and spiritual sanctity, and to perpetuate tradition. In this way, practicing Yoruba spirituality in the diaspora was itself an act of resistance to domination.

Many scholars, most notably Joseph Murphy, Janheinz Jahn, and Robert Farris Thompson, have discussed how cunningly the Yoruba subsumed their spirituality within the religions they encountered while enslaved in the Caribbean and the Americas. Historian Marta Vega sums up this strategy when she writes:

Cuba and Brazil are two of the many locations in which African descendants re-created and transformed their sacred African practices in a valiant effort to combat their colonial oppressors and resist attempts at cultural annihilation. Developing covert systems of fighting back, African and their descendants



successfully adapted their ancestral beliefs in the New World, often using the religion of their colonizers to protect African gods and goddesses (Vega, 156).

Not only did the Yoruba fight against oppression by concealing the orisa within the religion of the colonizers, they also waged war for their identity with the very rhythms, sounds, and movements associated with Yoruba practice. These performance features are what ethnomusicologist Katherine Hagedorn calls "divine utterances" because whether in high ritual or in mimetic secular performances, "the divinity of any given expression remains nearby, if not at the forefront of, the performance" (117). In this way, the very aesthetics of the spiritual work served to bring the orisa closer, thereby combating the forces that sought to eradicate them.

Practicing Yoruba spirituality became a way of honoring blackness, a critical survival tactic in racist environments. In the U.S., many black nationalists came to the tradition through the black power movement, which generated enormous interest in Africa, with particular attention placed on Yoruba spirituality.<sup>8</sup> A beautiful blackness could not be supported by "white religions." The adoption of African spiritual practices reinforced a burgeoning black consciousness that required an African-centered spiritual life. In Brazil, present-day Yoruba trace their lineage to the century-long (1595–1696) struggle for autonomy in Palmares in which Yoruba practitioners attempted to thwart colonization by the Portuguese. Their social and spiritual lives were at stake, and though the Portuguese won the political battle, the Yoruba-based belief system continues. In Cuba, twentieth century persecution of Yoruba-based religious practitioners was deeply embedded in racist ideologies that often mirrored the strategies for oppression in the U.S. To be a practitioner was to be situated outside of officially sanctioned society, indeed, to be fashioned as unfit for and hostile toward that society. As recent as the 1990s, Yoruba-based religious practitioners were afforded limited employment opportunities and were excluded from the Cuban Communist Party (Hagedorn, 193). In these ways, practicing the spiritual tradition came to be associated with political resistance and activism.

Not only is this spiritually based diaspora characterized by the historical political struggles surrounding the practice itself, it is also identified by the conspicuous marking of practitioners from all others. Throughout the Yoruba diaspora, practitioners are identified by the ileke and ide they wear and by the specific greetings they offer fellow practitioners. In public, the adornment and the greetings solidify the bonds between the practitioners and differentiate the practitioners from others, thereby loudly proclaiming their distinctiveness.

In the U.S., the yearlong *iyawo* period of initiation, during which one is consecrated to one's parent orisa, serves to separate the initiate from



those who are not in the tradition. Along with other restrictions, the iyawo must wear white from head to toe, must take meals on a mat, and cannot have physical contact with anyone who is not a priest in the tradition. This instantly sets the practitioner apart.

Yoruba performance has a long-standing relationship with insurgent politics and counterhegemonic impulses. Major branches of Yoruba Popular Traveling Theatre, especially the Ogunde Theatre of the 1940s, encouraged social awareness and political activism. Hubert Ogunde's *Strike and Hunger* was a direct response to British colonial constraints on food. While performing this work in the northern Nigerian city of Jos, Ogunde and some of his company members were arrested because the play challenged colonial authority. Jos was heavily populated by the Hausa who were more inclined to side with colonial rule than were the Yoruba. Although Ogunde included lighter fare in his company's repertoire, he earned much of his reputation from the social satires that dominated his later work (Clark, 132).

In *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, the Big Mamas participate in the ultimate act of resistance—training the next generation to be fortified with the power of the tradition. Daughter learns how Miss Mary used “magic” to wield revenge against a white man who disgraced her Big Mamas, and how Miss Shine invoked chants and danced in order to “right a hundred year old wrong.” Miss Shine’s “mind eased back, way, way back. She heard a chant far off and deep as slave graves and old Africa.” Miss Lamama provides the chant that stirs Miss Shine to action when she says “Blood, boil thick, run red like a river, slave scream, wail, moan after they dead. Daddy lynched, Mama raped, baby sister sold down river. Slaves scream, wail, moan after they dead.” Miss Lamama intones the chant many times while Miss Shines grinds glass to put in the sugar of her white employer who has attempted to beat down the spirit of the African Americans in their town (30-31). Youngblood includes specific references to the civil rights and black power movements by having characters talk about sit-ins and attempts to integrate lunch counters. The Big Mamas taught Daughter to use sound, movement, “magic,” and the telling of history as acts of resistance against the Jim Crow laws that guaranteed second-class citizenship to African Americans.

To tell one's own history is an act of self-determination and self-representation that challenges dominant narratives of race and politics. This self-narrative is particularly important in regions where race is said not to shape the social imaginary, as in the case of Brazil where blackness is maligned and oppressed in spite of official doctrine stating the contrary. In the preface to *Sortilege II: Zumbi Returns*, cultural critic Elisa Larkin Nascimento notes that “This myth [of racial democracy] as the full force of taboo in Brazilian society, and has gained great weight and currency

outside the country as well. Only very recently has it been successfully challenged, owing to the efforts of those like [Abdias do Nascimento] who have had the courage to denounce ‘racial democracy’ as a fraud” (204). Given the importance of countering the idea of a racial democracy to an understanding of black identity in Brazil, it is not surprising that Abdias do Nascimento devotes his play to examining what happens psychically to Emanuel when he marries a white woman and rejects his black lover. Ultimately the spirit of Zumbi, the ultimate Brazilian resister, slays Emanuel for his transgressions against blackness. Just before Emanuel's ritual death as sacrifice, the Yoruba practitioners in the play say:

Iyalorixa: Africans arise. . .

Chorus: Sarava!

Iyalorixa: Immortal quilombolas, stand ready!

Chorus: We are stand, ready! Axe!

Iyalorixa: Black people's freedom. . .

Chorus: Axe Xango!

Iyalorixa: Our peoples's dignity. . .

Chorus: Oxe Oxossi!

Iyalorixa: Our nation's power. . .

Chorus: Axe Zumbi

Iyalorixa: Axe Okemogun!

Chorus: Okezumbi, Axe! (244)

In these closing lines, followed only by a list of items that definitively mark Emanuel as the ebo of the play (palm oil. . .cassava flour. . .rum. . .cigar. . .black cock. . .), Nascimento gives the audience a Brazilian history lesson in which resistance is the key to survival, and that resistance has a Yoruba foundation.

The full title of Carril's play is *Shango de Ima, A Mystery Play*. The subtitle marks the play as a key element of the Yoruba liturgy just as European medieval mystery plays told primary stories from the Bible as a way of reinforcing the narratives that were basic to Christian theology. Carril seems to understand the political power of telling stories as a way of creating specific histories and realities. Because Yoruba religious stories stand outside of dominant religious traditions, the telling of *Shango de Ima* gives solidity to an alternative spirituality. Within the play, the audience not only experiences the complex nature of Shango, but also understands the Yoruba concept of good character, justice, lineage, sacrifice, and cosmic order. The primary features of the practice are expressed through theatre, an oral art form that is ideal for passing on a spiritual practice that is, in the main, oral.

Creation is how Ile-Ife began, and how it now continues through the mutually defining creative processes of aesthetics and spirituality. Yoruba



diasporic aesthetics are grounded in the power, sound, movement, and vibration of the orisa along with the twin forces of resistance and survival. Theatre's orality and present-tenseness make it the ideal form for transmitting the fully embodied aesthetics of Yoruba spirituality. In this way, the Yoruba cottonseed will continue to spawn vibrant, distinctive, regionally specific traditions.

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## ENDNOTES

1. This essay is part of a larger forthcoming study on Yoruba spirituality and jazz aesthetics in African American theatre traditions.
2. This oriki for Ile-Ife was provided by historian Dr. Akin Alao.
3. Yoruba scholar and Sango priestess Aina Olomo provided this discussion of the Ifa odu Osa based on her years of study of Yoruba sacred scripture and on the oral transmission of history from seasoned elders.
4. The notion of a "West African root" manifests in various, sometimes contradictory, ways throughout the diaspora. In Brazil there is a potent black consciousness and therefore Africanness, and in the U.S. this same sensibility has sometimes resulted in positioning African Yoruba in superior positions to U.S. Yoruba practitioners. Among some Cuban practitioners there is an acknowledgment of Yoruba as African yet an aversion to and even occasional hostility toward African American Yoruba practitioners. This complicated self-construction makes for frequently strained and competitive relationships in the Yoruba diaspora. For a detailed discussion of these relations, see Chapter 6 in Katherine Hagedorn's *Divine Utterances*, Chapter 10 of Aina Olomo's *Core of Fire*, and the relationship between Africanness and discrimination in Aline Helg's *Our Rightful Share*.
5. In fact, conceiving of Yoruba in this dense and multilayered fashion is far more appropriate than thinking of Yoruba as a singular monolithic spiritual practice. The term "Yoruba" came to identify a diverse group of West African people primarily located in present-day Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. It was a term of convenience that grouped together people with often sharp regional distinctions who recognized similar orisa. In this way, naming the regionally diverse yet aesthetically and politically comparable practices in Brazil, Cuba, and the U.S. as Yoruba replicates the early usage of the word in the nineteenth century.



6. During the 2003 8th Global Yoruba Congress held in Havana, Cuba, several Nigerian babalawos attempted to assert their authority over Cuban and U.S. practitioners arguing that Nigerian practice was the practice that all other Yoruba should emulate. This thinking was also present at the University of Texas 2004 annual conference on Africa organized by Toyin Falola. Just as in Havana, at this international gathering of scholars, artists and practitioners, a Nigerian babalawo acknowledged the existence of a Yoruba diaspora but insisted that the Nigerian practice is the authentic one that should be practiced in the diaspora regardless of the specific socio-political realities of each region in the diaspora. While these incidents remain anecdotal they point to the tensions that exist between Nigerian Yoruba and those in the Yoruba diaspora who have already forged distinctive Yoruba traditions.
7. Joel Adedeji, Gacke Kotrick, and Yemi Ogunbiyi provide the most substantial documentation on the movement from dramatic ritual (as exemplified by Egungun masquerades) to Apidan Theatre. The Apidan developed from the dramatic roots of the Egungun masquerades. The particular Egungun masqueraders whose role it is to entertain are variously called onidan, one who has tricks, or apidan, one who performs tricks. Apidan, then, becomes the transition from the deeply spiritual performance of dramatic ritual to the primarily secular and commercial world of Yoruba Popular Traveling Theatre.
8. J. Lorand Matory offers compelling evidence to explain why Yoruba practice became more prominent in the diaspora than other African spiritual practices. He challenges commonly held arguments about Yoruba dominance—such as the complexity of Yoruba, the high-class status of the enslaved Yoruba, and the recent arrival of enslaved Yoruba in the Americas. Matory argues that the “Lagosian cultural renaissance of the 1890s” produced a dynamic international group of writers who promulgated the virtues of Yorubanness, and it was this literary outpouring that both created and solidified Yoruba dominance in the diaspora.

