



Objects and Immortals: The Life of Obi in Ifa-Ori#a Religion

Citation

Wood, Funlayo Easter. 2017. Objects and Immortals: The Life of Obi in Ifa-Ori#a Religion. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:41140237>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

OBJECTS AND IMMORTALS:
THE LIFE OF OBI IN IFA-ORIṢA RELIGION

A dissertation presented

by

Funlayo Easter Wood

to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

African and African American Studies

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2017

© 2017 Funlayo Easter Wood
All rights reserved.

Objects and Immortals: The Life of Obi in Ifa-Oriṣa Religion

ABSTRACT

The kola nut is a ubiquitous presence in Yoruba culture. Whether being presented by the basketful to a potential bride's family, shared as a snack amongst friends, or offered to the spirits, *obi*—as it is called in Yoruba language—serves at once as food, medicine, and currency. As an object, *obi* bridges relational chasms, helping to forge and strengthen bonds amongst human beings; at the same time, *obi* is regarded as one of the original immaterial and immortal divinities in the universe, known in Yoruba as *irunmole*. It is this bipartite nature that renders *obi* a centrifugal force around which much Ifa-Oriṣa practice revolves; so important are its duties that no ritual can proceed without *obi*'s presence or the presence of a suitable substitute to stand in its stead.

This dissertation will interrogate the uses and meanings—the “life”—of *obi* in Ifa-Oriṣa religion. It will examine *obi*'s physical and spiritual origins, the duties it fulfills while on earth—including its role as the most frequently used divination medium in Ifa-Oriṣa practice—and the ways in which it dies or sheds its material body and returns to its immaterial, immortal form as an *irunmole*. Through excavation of ritual, material culture items, sacred narratives, proverbs, divination orature, and personal narratives, the dissertation will describe and analyze the ways in which characterizations of and interactions with *obi* reflect important religio-philosophical perspectives, particularly those of an ontological, epistemological, ethical, and existential nature. Using *obi* as a conduit, and employing theories and methods from within religious studies, comparative religion,

Africana philosophy, philosophy of religion, theology, anthropology of religion, semiotics, and philosophy of science, the dissertation will argue for the importance of kinesthetic and aural ways of knowing in the formation of the Ifa-Oriṣa world-sense. While these ways of knowing are often subordinated to the visual and oral, I will argue that adequate engagement with movement and audition are of paramount importance to the understanding of Ifa-Oriṣa and, by extension, other cosmologically similar African and Diasporic religions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ifá says we should be thankful, I say we should be thankful!

– Odu Ifa, Oṣe Ogunda

The story of how this dissertation came to fruition is a tale in its own right, filled with exciting plot twists, comedy, high drama and a wonderful cast of characters. While scholarship is an oft solitary task, it cannot be undertaken alone. Colleagues and advisors encourage us and help to refine our ideas, and connections with friends and family often sustain us through the long days and nights of reading, writing and re-writing. To and for all of these I am grateful.

Mo juba Olodumare, oba a terere k'aye.

Mo juba gbogbo egun mi, ka sun re o.

Mo juba awon oriṣa ti n rin pelu mi.

Mo juba!

I begin my expressions of earthly gratitude with all of the babalawo, iyanifa and oloriṣa from whom I gained and learned so much over the past several years. I give thanks to my Oluwo, Chief Efuwape Olusegun Olatunji for his aṣe and for his knowledge. E se pupo Baba, Ifá agbe wa o! To my Yeye, Olasuinbo Olomowewe, who united me with my precious Òrìṣà Obàtálá. He has always walked with me, but you opened the way for our complete embrace. E se gan ni fun aṣe yin, Obàtálá agbe wa o! To my master teacher and dear friend, Awo Oluwole Ifakunle Adetutu Alagbede, whose voice is sure to ring on many of these pages, your teachings and support have meant more to me than words could ever express. May the messages of Ifa continue to be clear to you. Aboru aboye abosise and e seun gan an ni to Awo Fayemi Abidemi Fakayode and his wife, my friend, Rafiah Fatosin Vitalis Fakayode who so kindly hosted me during my longest stay in Nigeria and who helped me immeasurably to gather and synthesize the material herein. E se gan also to Araba Ifayemi Elebuibon, Iyalosa Lola Elebuibon, and all of the babalawo and iyanifa who have shared your time, knowledge and aṣe with me—e se gan an ni o!

Scholarship can fall flat without mentors to guide you towards the right questions and the right methods with which to explore those questions. I have been blessed with wonderful advisers in the persons of Professors Jacob Kehinde Olupona, Kimberly Patton, Lewis Gordon, Rowland Abiodun, and Tracey Hucks. Thank you for your time, your energy, your guidance and for consistently challenging me. I offer special thanks to you, Prof. Olupona, for your support and all of the energy you dedicated to making sure my work is the best it can possibly be. E se pupo sà, Olorun a gbe wa o! Many mentors who are not formally on my committee also contributed to my knowledge and assisted me with conceptualizing and fleshing out the ideas contained herein. I would like to thank Professors Laura Grillo, Rosalind Hackett, Obafemi Jegede, Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, Oyeronke Olademo, Félix Ayoh'Omidire, and Baba John Mason for their time, energy and support. A very special thanks to Dr. Mama Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie for reminding me of the fourth element of my theoretical framework. I must also offer a hearty e se pupo to my Yoruba instructors—Ogbeni Sunday Oluokun, Dr. Kole Odutola, and Dr. Adeola Faleye—who

taught me so much more than language and without whom this work would not have been possible.

Funding is of paramount importance to any scholarly endeavor. I am grateful for the support I have received over the last seven years for my research and other academic activities from sources including: the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, Harvard University Center for African Studies, Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, Fulbright Foundation, and United States Department of Education.

Pou ti bou mwen, Dr. Kyrah Malika Daniels, my gift from Simbi with whom I've shared this doctoral journey since before day one. *Mèsi anpil* for all the laughter, the love, the intense discussions of ideas, the arms always ready to hug, the shoulder always ready for support, belly always ready for laughter, and of course the sauce! Keep being the fly and fabulous scholar you are. May we always continue to hype each other up and have each other's backs. For all my sensational sista-friends with whom I have shared love, laughter, brunches, hot tub soaks, road trips, prayers, meditation, and conversation throughout this process, thank you! Those moments have truly gotten me through. Special shouts to my sistas Farahly Ayodele Saint-Louis, Dr. Lisa Osunleti Beckley-Roberts, Empress Khytie Brown, Iyanifa Deanna Oyafemi Lowman, Dra. Sandy Plácido, and Dr. Julia Wallace Bernier for never being more than a call or a text away. I am also exceedingly grateful for my wonderful colleague-friends with whom I was able to discuss the earliest stages of the ideas herein, with particular thanks to Drs. Adam McGee and Ernie Mitchell.

To my parents, Reverend Ralph H. Hoist III and Reverend E. Regina Hoist: you are, without equivocation, the best parents a person could ever ask for. You always love me, you always see me, and you always support me. For this, as well as your love for me and for each other, I thank you. I give thanks as well to my entire family, all of whom have been incredibly supportive and wonderfully encouraging as I undertook this journey. I especially thank my grandmother, Mamie Ellen Sheppard for raising three powerful daughters to pave the way before me and to show me in a real way that anything is possible for Black women on a mission. I also give thanks to my nephew, Kenneth J. Jones, and my niece, Bree M. E. Vaughn, for being my first babies and giving me an excuse to keep coloring, watching cartoons, and laughing like crazy in the midst of all the serious work of writing this "super long book report," as Bree put it.

For my love, Elvis Menzies, the powers that be brought you back into my life at *precisely* the right moment. You brought me Oşun's cake at the beginning of this journey, and having you with me for the last leg has meant more to me than you will ever know. Thank you.

Finally, to the long, long line of people who came before me, my ancestors, my *isese*, I give you thanks and praise. Thank you for all you did that I might be here, walking this path, completing this particular part of the journey. I pray that I am everything you dreamed I might be and more.

Aşę.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vii
A Note on Terminology and Orthography	ix
Introduction	2
Integrated Duality and the VOAK Complex	10
Scope and Methodology	13
Review of Literature	18
Scholarly Contributions	22
Chapter Summaries.....	24
Chapter 1 Of Orun and Aye: The Dual Nature of Obi	27
The Elastic Ifa-Oriṣa Cosmos.....	34
The Births of Obi: Earthly Origins	52
The Births of Obi: Heavenly Origins.....	57
Conclusion	64
Chapter 2 Aural Aesthetics and Kinesthetic Conversations: Obi Divination and Epistemology.....	68
Key Signs and Obi’s Integrated Duality	74

Obi Speaks in Twos: Learning the Language.....	86
Obi and the Visual-Oral-Aural-Kinesthetic (VOAK) Complex.....	94
Conclusion.....	102
Chapter 3 Of Water and Women: Obi and Feminine Power.....	106
From Powerful Women to Witches.....	109
Water as Women, Woman as Water.....	115
Obi and Feminine Power.....	118
Conclusion.....	129
Chapter 4 From Kola to Coco: Diasporic Change and Continuity.....	131
Crossing the Waters: The Expansion and Contraction of Kola and Coco.....	136
Continental Coco: The Coconut in Yorubaland.....	141
From Kola to Coco: Change and Continuity.....	146
The Voice of the Coco.....	154
Conclusion.....	158
Conclusion.....	160
Bibliography.....	171

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY AND ORTHOGRAPHY

Ifa-Oriṣa religion has been referenced in a number of ways in the scholarly literature, including as “Ifa,” “Oriṣa devotion,” “Oriṣa worship,” and, most often, as “Yoruba religion.”¹ I prefer to use the composite term *Ifa-Oriṣa* as, rather than being bound by geography and ethnicity, this term refers to the two central frameworks at play within the religion regardless of its geographical and cultural location or the ethnicity of those practicing it: 1) the employment of Ifa including its divination system and associated knowledge and philosophies, and 2) the acknowledgement and worship of the entities known as Oriṣa.² The use of unbounded terminology to refer to the religion is, I believe, of particular importance as it continues to travel outside of its original geographic and cultural context.

It is scarcely possible to speak of Ifa-Oriṣa religion without also referencing Yoruba culture and, especially, Yoruba language. As such, I employ the use of “Yoruba culture” or “religio-culture” in place of “Ifa-Oriṣa religion” where appropriate, particularly where I wish to note an overlap between the religion and associated practices that may continue amongst even those who now officially adhere to another religion. Many ethnic Yoruba who have converted to Christianity or Islam, for example, may still participate in Ifa divination or ancestral practices they have come to consider “cultural” rather than “religious.”

¹ It is noteworthy that this designation refers to a complex of traditions and denominations rather than a singular, unified religion. Also of note is that the name “Yoruba” originally referred only to the Oyo Yoruba but came to refer to all speakers of Yoruba dialects in the 19th Century.

² Oriṣa, and all Yoruba nouns are both singular and plural without any change in form.

Finally, I similarly employ the term “religio-philosophy” to highlight the intertwined nature of religion and philosophy. Joseph Omoregbe has noted that “much African philosophical thought is preserved through the proverbs, stories and mythologies that accompany religion.”³ In a similar vein, Lewis Gordon remarks that “philosophy loses much when it fails to see its religious aspects.”⁴ In combining these terms, I seek to highlight the ways in which philosophical understandings exist within religious thought, and in which religious understandings often underlie philosophical concepts.

Turning to orthography, Yoruba is a tonal language employing three tones: low, mid, and high. Typically, the grave accent (`) is used to denote the low tone and the acute accent (´) denotes the high tone while the mid tone remains unmarked. Due to unreliable rendering of the orthographical marks, tone marks will not be used in the text except where there is a specific need to differentiate between two words having the same spelling but different tones (ex: *bí* = to give birth versus *bì* = to throw up). The Yoruba alphabet contains four letters not present in the English alphabet—*ẹ*, *gb*, *o*, and *ş*—while it does not contain the English letters *c*, *q*, *v*, *x*, and *z*. The letters *ẹ*, *o*, *gb*, and *ş* will be rendered faithfully and the reader unfamiliar with Yoruba should note their sounds, and Yoruba vowel sounds, as follows:

a – the ‘a’ as in <u>al</u> ive	o – the ‘o’ as in <u>g</u> o	o – the ‘aw’ as in <u>aw</u> e
e – the ‘ea’ as in <u>gr</u> eat	u – the ‘u’ as in <u>gl</u> ue	gb – no English equivalent
i – the ‘i’ as in <u>el</u> ite	ẹ – the ‘e’ as in <u>g</u> et	ş – the ‘sh’ as in <u>sh</u> ake

³ Joseph Omoregbe, “African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today.” In *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 5.

⁴ Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times*, The Radical Imagination Series. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 51.

INTRODUCTION

On a warm June day in 2008, just two days after my undergraduate graduation, I boarded a plane to Nigeria—that’s all I knew of where I was going. My mother asked, like any good mother would, where *precisely* I was headed, *who* I was going to see, and what *exactly* it was that I was going to do. She was, like any good mother, less than thrilled with my reply: “I don’t know.” It was true, I didn’t.

Despite having been raised in an African American Christian household, Christian theology never resonated with me. I did not turn to atheism, like some I knew who felt a similar dissonance; I always knew God was there and I desperately wanted to connect, just not in the way I had been taught. Over many years of seeking, searching, and turning down various spiritual paths, I made the final turn onto the road I would eventually call home. I had anticipated the spiritual journey on which I was embarking taking place much closer to home, perhaps in a basement in my native New York surrounded by familiar faces and languages I understood well. As the spirits would have it, that was not to be the case. Instead, I had been directed through divination to Işara Remo, a small town about two hours’ drive outside of Lagos. It was there, in a place where I had never been, with people I had never seen, and whose language I did not understand that I would undergo initiation into the Ifa-Orişà religion.

Without the benefit of understanding most of what was being said around me, my other senses sharpened throughout the process. Though I did not realize it then, I was paying closer attention to bodily movements, tastes, smells, sounds, and those other aspects of interaction which I was able to discern without the aid of linguistic cues. In

between taking copious notes and journaling, I watched—really *watched*—listened, and learned.

It was here, with all of my senses and sensibilities wrenched open by the unfamiliar environs in which I found myself that I first met *obi*. Our relationship started on a somewhat discordant note since the first thing I was told about her was that she was my *eewo*, something taboo that I was not to ingest.

“*E ma je obi ooo*,” warned the babalawo who had affectionately yet forcefully called me either by my full name (“Easter Wood!”) or my rank amongst the initiates (“Number four!”), four of the few English words he knew, each time he addressed me.

“What does that mean?” I asked my Oluwo, Baba Efuwape Olatunji, the head officiant of my initiation who was also acting as an interpreter between us initiates and the other babalawo who spoke considerably less English than he did.⁵ Despite not understanding the words, the body language made it clear that I was being cautioned about something.

“Your *odu* says that you should not eat *obi*,” replied Baba Efuwape, holding one between his thumb and forefinger and bringing it close to my face for emphasis. I had never seen the small, pinkish, semi-spherical orb before my arrival in Nigeria so it didn't seem that refraining from eating it would be that big of a challenge. I would come to

⁵ *Baba* means father in Yoruba and it is customary to call elder men *Baba* and to use *Baba*—or *Iya*, meaning mother, for women—as an appellation before their name, particularly amongst Ifa-Orisha practitioners. This custom has also carried over into diasporic practice.

learn, however, that avoiding obi would take a bit of doing here in Yorubaland where it is at the center of most every ceremonial event in which I was to participate.

The very next day, in fact, during another phase of my initiation ceremony, drummers made offerings to the sacred drums—divinities in their own right known as *ayan*—and then used obi to perform divination in order to assess the drums’ satisfaction with the offering. Upon reading the drums’ approval in the configuration of the pieces of obi that were thrown, one of the drummers began to break one section of the obi into smaller bits and to distribute those morsels to each person in the crowd. As each person received their piece, they placed it in their mouths and chewed with relish. Anxiety began to well up within my body as he drew nearer to me and I remembered my instruction from the previous day: “*E ma je obi o!*” (Don't eat obi!)

I took the small piece of obi that the drummer handed to me and, as I took it, he motioned toward his mouth wordlessly imploring me to eat it. I nodded, smiled, and sheepishly hid the fragment in my hand as I looked around, my eyes desperately searching the crowd in the dimness of the moonlit compound for Baba Efuwape to ask him if this occasion merited a disregard of the warning I had received the previous day. After what seemed like an eternity, my eyes met his and I held the piece of obi up, the slight raise of my eyebrows pregnant with inquiry. He rushed over to me.

“You don’t eat that!” He said firmly but gently.

“Okay, I was just making sure,” I replied with a nod of understanding.

“It is your taboo; that means you never eat it. Don’t forget o. Never.”



In the opening pages of his book, *Sensuous Scholarship*, Paul Stoller recalls how his reflections on a Sufi tale of a young man named Mojud inspired him into a richer, more corporeal experience of the world and of his own scholarship.⁶ Under the direction of his guru, Khadir, Mojud quits his lucrative job as a king's aide and successively becomes a fisherman, a farmer, and then a hide salesman, submitting completely to the directives he is given at each instance in which Khadir tells him it is time for a change. It is engagement with these more physical, land-and-body-based pursuits—in contrast to his more cerebral former occupation—that eventually leads Mojud to enlightenment. These stories, both Stoller's and Mojud's, are reminiscent of my own entrée into the world of sensuous scholarship and, particularly, into this project. Though I did not know it then, it was stepping out on faith and subsequently forging a relationship with a then unknown object-entity which would put me on the path to spiritual and intellectual enlightenment and shape the course of my first major piece of scholarship.

A Yorùbá proverb says “*eni ti o fun ni obi mu iye wa*” (the person who brings obi brings life) which speaks to the importance of obi—kola nut, as it is known in English—in Yoruba culture, where it is a ubiquitous presence. Whether being presented by the basketful to a potential bride's family, shared as a snack amongst friends, or offered to the spirits, obi serves at once as food, medicine, and currency. As an object, obi bridges relational chasms, helping to forge and strengthen bonds amongst human beings; at the same time, obi is regarded as one of the original immaterial and immortal divinities in the

⁶ Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (College Station, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

universe, known in Yoruba as *irunmole*. It is this bipartite nature that renders obi a centrifugal force around which much of the practice of Yoruba indigenous religion—referred to here as Ifa-Oriṣa—revolves. So important are its duties that few if any rituals can proceed without obi's presence or the presence of a suitable substitute to stand in its stead.

Despite the omnipresence and importance of obi both in Yoruba culture writ large and also in Ifa-Oriṣa religious practice, specifically, there has been virtually no scholarship about the kola nut in these contexts.⁷ While the Ifa-Oriṣa religion—in particular, the Ifa divination system and its associated knowledge and material culture—is the most studied aspect of Yoruba religious culture (if not African religious cultures more broadly) heretofore, there has been no book-length scholarly treatment and only a few articles and pamphlets focusing on obi divination, not to speak of the other uses of obi within Ifa-Oriṣa.⁸

There are many possible reasons why this is the case. The most significant, I argue, is that while the knowledge associated with Ifa has often been reduced to its associated oral literature, giving it a closer similarity with the “book faiths” of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and therefore more validity to outsiders as a cogent system, obi—like many other aspects of Yoruba religion and African religions that go understudied—

⁷ I specify “in this context” because there are quite a few scientifically-focused books and articles on the kola nut as a stimulant and also a few historical treatises on the kola nut trade in West Africa, but almost none on their use in the context of Yoruba culture or Ifa-Oriṣa religion.

⁸ Many technical how-to manuals exist regarding divination with pieces of coconut (also called “obi”) in the Americas (discussed in chapter 4) but very little scholarly work on either it or kola nut.

lacks the type of scriptocentric knowledgebase comparable to that of the Bible or the Qur'an, instead occupying a decidedly more embodied space. Even insofar as this embodied space of Ifa-Oriṣa has been studied, it has often been the grand behaviors around festivals or other large public events rather than every day micropractices like obi divination which, Elizabeth Pérez argues, are the crux of Black Atlantic religions—and, I assert, African religions by extension—as they “develop the faculties, sentiments, and expertise indispensable for their viability and spread.”⁹ As well, whereas Ifa is male-dominated and historically connected with Yoruba monarchy, the use of obi is more quotidian and egalitarian: every initiate of any oriṣa, whether female or male, must use obi in her or his practice and, depending on one's initiations and level of practice, she or he may ostensibly use it every day. Obi may, therefore, be one of those objects that is “hidden in plain sight,” so commonly used as to go unnoticed as a site of investigation.

This dissertation aims to fill this knowledge chasm by interrogating the uses and meanings—the “life”—of obi in Ifa-Oriṣa religion. It will examine obi's physical and spiritual origins, the duties it fulfills while on earth—including its role as the most frequently used divination medium in Ifa-Oriṣa practice—and the ways in which it dies or sheds its material body and returns to its immaterial, immortal form as an irunmole. Through ethnographic excavation of ritual, material culture items, sacred narratives, proverbs, divination orature, and personal narratives, including some autoethnography, the dissertation will describe and analyze the ways in which characterizations of and

⁹Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 11.

interactions with obi reflect important religio-philosophical perspectives, particularly those of an ontological, epistemological, ethical, and existential nature. Using obi as a conduit, and employing theories and methods from within religious studies, Africana philosophy, theology, anthropology of religion, semiotics, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of science, the dissertation will argue for the importance of kinesthetic and aural ways of knowing in the formation of the Ifa-Orisha *worldsense*.¹⁰ While these ways of knowing are often subordinated to the visual (most notably writing) and oral, I will argue that adequate engagement with movement and aurality are of paramount importance to the understanding of Ifa-Orisha and, by extension, other African and Diasporic religions.

While subjects requiring the deployment of so many disciplines and perspectives are typically classified as “interdisciplinary,” a major concern of my approach is that the subject exceeds the scope of any single discipline and at the same time requires communication across these disciplines for its illumination. It thus challenges the disciplines themselves and is therefore pointing beyond them. This is why I reason for a *transdisciplinary* approach as advocated by Lewis Gordon, Tracey Hucks, and Dianne Stewart.¹¹ Though the term has seldom been employed directly, the study of Ifa-Orisha

¹⁰ Oyeronke Oyewunmi suggests that, in contrast to many Western thinkers who privilege vision in their analysis of the world, many non-Western societies privilege other senses. She therefore advocates for the use of “worldsense” rather than “worldview.” See Oyeronke Oyewunmi, “Visualizing the Body” in *African Gender Studies: A Reader* by Oyeronke Oyewunmi, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 4.

¹¹ This perspective is heavily inspired by Lewis Gordon and his discussion of the ossification of disciplines. See his *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (The Radical Imagination Series. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006). See also Dianne M. Stewart Diakit , and Tracey E. Hucks.

religion and Yoruba religio-culture has tended toward the transdisciplinary as its study has long been carried out using methodologies from many disciplines within the humanities and social sciences including theology, history, anthropology, art history, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, and, to a lesser extent, the study of religion.¹² Approaching the study of African religions in a transdisciplinary manner is an important step toward avoiding the pitfalls of being invested in any particular discipline as that which fits all. David Westerlund has, for example, presented a critique of the historical tendency of both anthropologists and religious historians to reduce African religions in unproductive ways. Religious studies scholars, he says, tend to Christianize and decontextualize the study of African religions, taking them as *sui generis* entities rather than as parts of cultural complexes while anthropologists, on the other hand, have a tendency to over-secularize the study and approach African religious phenomena as so culture-bound as to be virtually incapable of generating generalizable knowledge about religion. To combat these tendencies, he has challenged emerging scholars to “Africanize” the study examining African religions on their own terms, taking into account both emic and etic perspectives.¹³ Jacob Oluṣona has suggested that one way in which to accomplish this is to recognize religion, in general, and African religions, in

“Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field.” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013), 28-77.

¹²For a good history of the study of Yoruba Religious Tradition see Jacob Oluṣona, “The Study of Yoruba Religion in Historical Perspective,” *Numen*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Sep. 1993), 240-273.

¹³ Jacob K Oluṣona, *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (New York: International Religious Foundation, 1991), 13.

particular, as pretheoretical phenomena that begin *experientially* rather than as intellectual enterprises.¹⁴ As such, he argues, a myriad of approaches are necessary to fully capture these experiences, including morphological-phenomenological and hermeneutic-phenomenological methods that take into account historical processes and change over time. In particular, he advocates taking seriously the logic that undergirds these systems and allowing the materials— be they sacred narratives (“myths”), material items, or other data—to speak for themselves rather than subjecting them to preconceived theistic formulae. Further, Oluṣona, calls for the privileging of *indigenous hermeneutics* or “paradigms and modes of interpretation that are explicitly embedded in the traditions” being studied. He argues, and I agree, that as these traditions are already interpretive, rather than ascribing meaning *to* them, we should seek to excavate meaning *from* them.¹⁵ It is to this endeavor that this dissertation commits itself.

Integrated Duality and the VOAK Complex

Obi is a fitting entity to speak for Ifa-Oriṣa religion and provide entrée into the Ifa-Oriṣa worldsense since it embodies the both-and paradigm inherent in many aspects of Yoruba religio-culture. Aside from its own nature as both an object and an autonomous entity, when channeling the declarations of the oriṣa, the obi’s very voice is duality: it speaks in ups and downs, lights and darks, *ire* (blessings) and *ibi* (losses),

¹⁴ Oluṣona, 28.

¹⁵ Jacob Oluṣona, *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 1.

acceptance and rejection. It is these complementary dyads that enable the obi to communicate in such a way that humans may understand and interpret the messages of the ancestors and oriṣa.

While duality is a universal phenomenon and not unique to Yoruba culture or Ifa-Orisa religion, physical and linguistic representations of duality are particularly pervasive within both.¹⁶ Robert Preucel notes that all communities have “regular and repeatable patterns of meaning” that shape their identities.¹⁷ Within Ifa-Orisa religion and Yoruba culture writ large, dualistic objects, motifs and ideologies hold such a prominent position in this pattern that I posit duality—as embodied and philosophized through various tropes of halving, doubling and coupling—as a key to understanding and analyzing the religion. Further, in examining the type of duality manifest in these representations, I propose the concept of *integrated duality*.

Integrated duality stands in contrast to the concepts of binary opposition and binary complementarity posited by Claude Levi-Strauss and Sophie Bọṣede Oluwole, respectively. I align myself with aspects of the structuralist program as elucidated by Levi-Strauss in that I accept the power and possibility of gleaning the unspoken meanings and rules behind cultural and religious acts and agree that studying relationships—whether actual or fictive—mythology, and linguistic expression is an effective means through which to identify these tacit cultural significations. Indeed, this exercise

¹⁶ Babatunde Lawal, “Sustaining the Oneness in Their Twoness: Poetics of Twin Figures (*Ère Ìbeji*) Among the Yoruba.” In *Double Trouble Twice Blessed: Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures*, edited by Philip M. Peek (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 82.

¹⁷Robert W. Preucel, *Archaeological Semiotics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 8.

comprises a large part of my project. I submit, however, that in the case of Ifa-Oriṣa it is integrated dualities rather than binary oppositions that underpin the system and that it is these that we should seek to identify and analyze in order to arrive at second- and third-order levels of understanding. The main point of departure between integrated duality and the concept of binary opposition or complementarity is that while the latter posits sets such as light and dark, cooked and raw, male and female, and nature and culture as opposites in sharp contrast to—and, therefore possibly in conflict with—one another,¹⁸ integrated duality sees them as fully constitutive of one another or, to use Stanley Diamond's words, as “aspects of a single condition.”¹⁹ I argue that understanding the continuum on which these dualistic concepts exist and positing the dualities as *integrated* rather than *opposite* (the latter which implying a this-or-that rather than the both-and orientation characteristic of Ifa-Oriṣa and Yoruba culture writ large) productively changes our view of their relationship and positively contributes to the construction of an indigenous hermeneutic.

Another crucial and related aspect of forming this indigenous hermeneutic is the identification of what I refer to as the *visual-oral-aural-kinesthetic* (VOAK) complex. In introducing this compound term, I assert that the tendency to refer to Yoruba, Ifa-Oriṣa and similar African cultures as “oral,” typically in contrast to scriptocentric Western cultures and religions, and furthermore to say that their knowledge has been passed down “orally” through the generations omits three vital epistemological components, namely

¹⁸ While Oluwole comes closer to my idea of integration by using the term “complementarity” rather than “opposition,” her description of how these binaries function is still much more similar to Levi-Strauss' conception than my own.

¹⁹ Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1974), 6.

the visual, the aural and the kinesthetic. Within VOAK-oriented cultures and religions, of which Ifa-Oriṣa is one, that which is rendered orally is intended to be received aurally, and this process of recitation and reception is often accompanied by movements of the body which are also charged with meaning which are intended to be received visually. Given this, it is clear that speaking of the oral alone does not suffice; these three modes work in tandem and must be studied as a unit in order to gain the fullest understanding not only of any given utterance but also of the epistemology as a whole.

Scope and Methodology

The goals of this dissertation are threefold: to document the various conceptions and uses of obi in Ifa-Oriṣa religion, to present the concepts of *integrated duality* and the *visual-oral-aural-kinesthetic* (VOAK) complex and analyze obi's use in light of them, and—to a lesser degree—to examine the ways in which the conceptualization and use of obi have both changed and remained constant as it was dispersed into the African Diaspora as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. As aforementioned, I have utilized a transdisciplinary range of methods in order to accomplish these aims. Charles Long aptly notes that simply forcing various types of interpretations and descriptions together does not, resolve the deficiencies of any one of them; what I rather intend, therefore, is to uncover the ways in which they organically articulate, to locate my methodology in those theoretical joints.²⁰

²⁰ Long, 31.

One need only listen to a child ask a barrage of questions about a particular phenomenon in order to understand how intuitive it is to work and question in a transdisciplinary manner. Upon observing a diviner use obi to communicate with an oriṣa, for example, the child may ask: Why did the diviner throw the obi? Why did she use obi instead of something else? Where did the obi come from? Is the obi really talking to the oriṣa? Is the oriṣa real? How do you know? Where did the oriṣa come from? Who is the first person who ever used obi? Can I do it? These questions run the gamut of ontology (“Is the oriṣa real?”), to epistemology (“How do you know?”), to history (“Who was the first...?”), to science (“Where did the obi come from?”) and more, and each question may fit into more than one category thus broadening the field even more. The question, “Where did obi come from?” may, for example, be answered using scientific data about the plantations and trees, or sacred narratives that speak to obi’s universal origins. It is only answering each of these types of questions from as many angles as possible that will provide the fullest picture. While the scope of this project will not allow me to answer every conceivable question about the obi, there are at least six overarching ones to which it will respond perhaps in the spirit of the child-like, transdisciplinary heuristic approach just mentioned: Where did obi come from? How is obi used? Why use obi rather than any other item? What is the relationship between obi and the rest of the natural world? What can obi tell us about gender and social relationships? What can obi tell us about Yoruba concepts of knowledge and learning?

Answering these questions rests, in large part, on experiencing obi in action. As a practitioner of Ifa-Orisa as well as a researcher, I have had the unique opportunity to draw upon both my personal experience as well as my observation of other practitioners

in the course of my research. Between 2008 and the present, I have observed at least 300 instances of obi's use in a variety of rituals whereby it was employed as a divination medium, a purification agent, an activating agent, and a monetary agent among other uses. While I have been participant-observer of Ifa-Oriṣa practice for eight years, the period of my formal IRB-approved research spanned four years from June 2011 through December 2015. During this period, I spent a total of sixteen months in Nigeria.

From June through September 2011, I lived in Ile-Ife, Oṣun State and attended Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) as a Fulbright-Hays scholar. During that period, I primarily observed and participated in ritual with Dr. Abiḡdun Agboola—a babalawo and professor of rural sociology at OAU—at his home temples in Ile-Ife and Oyo town with some shorter stays in Iṣara Remo, Ogun State and Ilobu, Oṣun State. From June through September 2013, I lived in Oṣogbo, Oṣun State and worked primarily with the Ogbe Yonu temple headed by the Araba (chief babalawo) of Oṣogbo, Baba Ifayemi Eḡebuibon, with a great deal of assistance from his family, especially his nephew, Baba Adeniyi Eḡebuibon, and Adeniyi's wife, Fanike Taiwo Eḡebuibon. My longest stay in Nigeria was from February through November 2015 during which time I lived in Ibadan, Oyo State and worked primarily with Baba Fayemi Abidemi Fakayode, of the Ose Meji temple, and Dr. Charles Obafemi Jeḡede, a lecturer in religious studies and African studies at the University of Ibadan, initiate of Ifa, and ordained Methodist priest.

During each of these stays in Nigeria, I immersed myself in the surroundings, studying and speaking Yoruba language and participating in all household activities—the sacred, the secular, and everything in between. What became clear throughout all of these interactions is that, in Yoruba lived reality, there is no clear demarcation between sacred

and secular space and or time; Eliadean hierophanies manifest almost constantly with the sacred permeating the secular and the secular breaking through at sacred moments.

While, indeed, there are times and spaces set aside for worship, divination, and other sacred activities, any space might become spontaneously sacralized at any moment by the recitation of a prayer or verse of Ifa, the impromptu throwing of a kola nut or an *opele* (divining chain), or the extemporaneous delivery of a sermon-lecture or singing of a hymn. My recorder stayed on standby whether I was in a temple or a beer parlor, as Ifa-Orisha practice permeates all spaces and times amongst practitioners.

Conversely, throughout this process I found myself having to acclimate to the degree to which the profane also resided in sacred spaces. African American Ifa-Orisha practitioners—and diasporic practitioners at large—tend to treat each ritual act with the utmost reverence often demanding complete attention and concentration, including the silencing of cell phones and the silence of those present unless singing or engaged in some other aspect of the ritual, among other displays of deference to the activities taking place and the babalawo or orisha engaged in them.²¹ Practitioners in Yorubaland, on the other hand, frequently answered calls, sold goods, sent for beer or food, and engaged in any number of other quotidian activities in the midst of spiritual ceremonies. This difference is due at least in part to the fact that most African American practitioners—

²¹ While there is some debate over the meaning of “African American” and who fits into this category, by this term—which I will use interchangeably with Black American—I mean native-born Americans of African descent who are the descendants of individuals enslaved in the United States. By “diasporic” I mean individuals of African descent born in the Americas who are the descendants of those enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade and who may be of a variety of nationalities, including African American.

including myself—have been raised within an American Protestant framework within which the sacred and the secular reside in decidedly separate realms and whereby one’s “church behavior” and “outside behavior” were supposed to be categorically different. While answering one’s cell phone during an American church service, for example, would be taken as a high form of disrespect, in Yorubaland, *not* answering one’s phone—even just to say “I’m in a ceremony, I’ll call you back”—is often considered disrespectful to the individual calling, akin to not responding to an in-person greeting. In speaking with African American practitioners who have been initiated in Yorubaland, many have noted this difference in orientation and also their own struggle with adapting to it and taking the priests’ engagement with other activities to mean that she is not giving her full attention to the tasks at hand.

On the American side of the water, I have benefitted immeasurably from my relationship with my master-teacher, Chief Oluwole Ifakunle Adetutu Alagbede and my participation in his temple, Ile Omo Ope, located in Harlem, New York since 2008. Between September 2008 and August 2010, the period of my deepest training, I observed and acted as a scribe for no less than 100 Ifa divination sessions and participated in many other rituals, the vast majority of which involved the use of kola nut and/or coconut. Baba Ifakunle is an African American practitioner who was initiated in Yorubaland and who has been trained by both Nigerian and American teachers, so his practice is an amalgamation of both Yorubaland and diasporic techniques. Between 2009 and 2014, I also periodically observed rituals at Ile Asho Funfun located in Tallahassee, Florida and headed by Baba Bill Olaitan Lowman and Dr. Huberta Salako Jackson-Lowman. Much of my perspective on coconut divination amongst African Americans comes from my

observation experiences in these two locales supplemented by interviews with and observation of other African American practitioners.

Review of Literature

As noted above, while the literature on Ifa-Oriṣa writ large is voluminous, including a good portion on Ifa divination and Yoruba divination more broadly, literature on the usage of kola nut within the religion is scant.²² While divination is not the central focus of this study, it plays a prominent enough role to put this work in conversation with other literature on Yoruba divination forms—and divination more broadly—as well as contributing to the literature on obi, specifically.

As regards the literature on divination, one can scarcely write on Yoruba divination without engaging with William Bascom's classic texts, *Ifa: Divination Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (1969)²³ and *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (1980)²⁴, both of which present a brief history of the respective system with the bulk of each text being comprised of verses from each system's knowledge corpus. In addition to the information I obtained directly from

²² See Jacob Olupona, "The Study of Yoruba Religion in Historical Perspective," *Numen*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Sep. 1993), 240-273 for a historical perspective of the study of Yoruba religion and review of much of the literature through 1993. See Oludamini Ogunnaike, "Ifa and Sufism: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions." (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University 2015), for review of some of the literature since 1993.

²³ William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, 1st Midland bk. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

²⁴ William Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (Indiana University Press, 1980).

practitioners, Bascom's documentation of information about obi in the corpuses of Ifa and erindinlogun (16 cowry divination) proved valuable to the completion of this project.

This work is also in conversation with K. Noel Amherd's *Reciting Ifa*²⁵ and Velma Love's *Divining the Self*²⁶, both of which address Ifa from the perspective of performance. Amherd argues that the Ifa verses should be seen in terms of their performance as they are recited rather than as "text," while Love argues that they should be seen as both and addresses the particular challenges of working with them as such. I engage with these assertions by pushing them and advocating for VOAK as a supplement to—or, perhaps, even a replacement for—performance theory as regards Ifa. While performance has its utility, I will show how VOAK captures African ritual more precisely and from a more indigenous perspective.

While not centered on Yoruba divination forms, Laura Grillo's study of Dogon divination²⁷ has also influenced this work. In particular, Grillo's discussion of the ethics of divination and how it helps practitioners view the world as it is and transform it into what it ought to be is particularly pertinent to my discussion of obi. Though divination is often viewed as an exercise in which an individual seeks information from a source

²⁵ K. Noel Amherd, *Reciting Ifa: Difference, Heterogeneity, and Identity* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2010).

²⁶ Velma E. Love, *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

²⁷ Laura Grillo, "Dogon Divination as an Ethic of Nature," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 311

outside oneself, as Grillo asserts and I agree and will discuss, it is as often an exercise prompting one to examine his or her own thoughts and behavior and find answers within.

Turning to the literature on obi, Adekola Adeosun, Idowu Hakeem Abimbola, and Jare Ajayi's *Orọ ti obi nsọ (What the Kolanut is Saying)* (1993)²⁸, while tiny at only twenty-five pages, is the most comprehensive volume on obi's meaning and contains orature associated with each of the obi divination signatures (discussed in chapter 3). The major shortcoming of this book, aside from its brevity, however, is that it takes a completely scriptocentric approach that pays no obeisance to the mechanics of obi divination. As well, it focuses only on divination without attention to any of the other uses of obi within Ifa-Oriṣa, save passing reference to obi's use as medicine. Afolabi Epega's book, *Obi Divination* (1994)²⁹, was published just a year later and at about twenty pages longer than Adeosun's—many of which are illustrations—it is still quite scant. It, too falls into the same pitfalls of being quite scriptocentric and it very interestingly seeks to connect obi expressly with Ifa by referring to all of the possible obi divination outcomes as odu Ifa.

While not the focus of the volume, Peter Rutherford McKenzie's *Hail Orisha!: A Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (1997)³⁰ offers, perhaps, the most references to the varied uses of the kola nut within the context

²⁸ Kola A. Adeosun, Idowu Hakeem Abimbola, and Jare Ajayi, *What the Kolanut Is Saying: The Proper Use Understanding of What the Kolanut Oracle Can Tell Us* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Creative Books, 1999).

²⁹ Afolabi A. Epega, *Obi Divination* (New York, NY: Imole Oluwa Institue, 1994).

³⁰ P. R. McKenzie, *Hail Orisha!: A Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Studies on Religion in Africa (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997).

of Ifa-Oriṣa of any of previous work on the tradition. Unlike other works that make passing reference to obi as an offering and divination medium, McKenzie notes the use of obi in making and breaking covenants among other functions.³¹

John Mason's *Four New World Yoruba Rituals* (1983, 1993)³² devotes a chapter to obi divination and, while his primary focus is coconut obi as conceptualized and used in the Americas, he does devote some attention to kola and the nuances of the divination signatures when using kola as compared with coconut. In a similar vein, though David H. Brown's *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (2003)³³ makes only passing reference to obi, it is a good source of information about the process—or conceptions of the process—of change and continuity of ritual and material culture as Ifa-Oriṣa transformed into Santería and Lukumi in Cuba.

Lastly, several popular books have been written about obi divination including recent tracts by Ra Ifagbemi Babalawo (1999)³⁴, Ócha'ni Lele (2001)³⁵, Baba Osundiya (2001)³⁶, and Miguel “Willie” Ramos (2012).³⁷ While these books primarily focus on

³¹ McKenzie, *Hail Orisha!*, 288.

³² John Mason, *Four New World Yoruba Rituals*, 2nd ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1985).

³³ David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³⁴ Ra Ifagbemi Babalawo, *The Little Oracle That Goes a Long Way: Ifa's Obi Abata* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Athelia Henrietta PR, 1999).

³⁵ Ócha 'ni Lele, *Obi: Oracle of Cuban Santería* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2001).

³⁶ Baba Osundiya, *Awo Obi: Obi Divination in Theory and Practice* (Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001).

³⁷ Miguel Willie Ramos, *Obi Agbón: Lukumi Divination with Coconut* (Miguel “Willie” Ramos, 2012).

instructing practitioners in the use of either kola nut or coconut for divination, each offers a bit of history—most including at least some mention of the kola nut and hypothesizing the change from the use of kola in Yorubaland to coconut in the diaspora. Each also transcribes and presents sacred orature both from Yorubaland and the diaspora which is helpful in analyzing and contextualizing diasporic transformation of the concept and usage of obi.

Scholarly Contributions

Due to the biases leveled against African and other indigenous religions since the introduction of their study into the Euromodern academy, many scholars of African religions have devoted so much time to writing *on* them—that is, defending them against claims of primitiveness and explaining why they are valid, why they are worthy of study, and why they should be taken seriously—that they have not had ample opportunity to write *about* them and to truly delve into, explore and analyze concepts and frameworks. While Ifa-Oriṣa religion is one of the traditions on which and about which much has been written, the field is still ripe for exploration and there are several contributions yet to be made. It is my hope that this dissertation has made three unique contributions to this vast area of knowledge.

First, as noted above, this dissertation is the first full-scale, monograph-length, scholarly study of obi in the context of Ifa-Oriṣa religion. As an object-entity and subject that is so integrally involved in the practice of the religion, it is crucial that its role therein be better understood for, as I will argue, interaction with obi provides many keys into Ifa-

Oriṣa worldsense and also Yoruba religio-culture writ large. Secondly, employing Olupona's call for the engagement of indigenous hermeneutics one of my primary methodologies is the analysis of mythological thought, taking seriously the system of logic therein as this gives provide invaluable insight into obi's centrality. While Lévi-Strauss and others have suggested what indigenous thinkers do in constructing myths is *like* philosophy, they have stopped short of counting it *as* philosophy. This is a conceptual move, however, that I am prepared to make. In so doing, I seek to contribute to an Africanized interpretive model through which other African religions may be analyzed and, in so doing, also to contribute to African metaphilosophy of religion.

Finally, as elucidated through my proposal of the visual-oral-aural-kinesthetic (VOAK) complex, I posit that indigenous African modes of communication—which encompasses oral and written language as well as material and kinesthetic expression—offer insights into both religion and philosophy that have been grossly underexplored, particularly the importance of both kinesthesia and aurality. This understudy is owed largely to the fact that studies of religion and philosophy have traditionally been scriptocentric to a fault. While anthropologists, folklorists, art historians, and others engaged in various types of cultural study have come to terms with the importance of non-scriptural sources and diverse means through which to know the world, scholars of religion and philosophers have been much slower to follow suit. I situate my project squarely at the crossroads of these two disciplines and seek to push against the boundaries that have historically been erected to exclude African religions and their associated ontologies and epistemologies from both fields. The main method through which I will accomplish this goal is through examining the heuristic qualities of

communication, broadly construed to include ordinary speech acts, myths, proverbs, material culture, and movement. Proceeding in this way lends itself to a closer examination of the significance of how each mode of communication seeks to represent the world of things, both physical and philosophical, to which it refers, which has implications for the study of Ifa-Oriṣa and other cosmologically similar African religions. Within this area, the dissertation will also contribute to the growing discussion and body of work on the concept of materiality and, in particular, what Jane Bennett refers to as “vital materiality.”³⁸

Chapter Summaries

The dissertation is divided into four chapters, each of which explores different aspects of obi’s life: where she came from, the duties she performs, how she is conceived, and how her practice has transformed. Chapter one, entitled *Of Orun and Aye: The Dual Nature of Obi*, outlines and analyzes the beginnings of obi in its physical manifestation as well as its manifestation as an irunmole. It will provide a brief cosmological sketch to situate the obi within the Ifa-Oriṣa world-sense and then present both biological data as well as religious narratives to introduce the reader to obi.

In chapter two, *Aural Aesthetics and Kinesthetic Conversations: Obi Divination and Epistemology*, I explore obi as the mouthpiece of the Oriṣa by describing and

³⁸ Quoted in Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “Mysterium Materiae: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, Volume 41, Number 4, November 2012.

analyzing the process of obi divination, lightly contrasting it with the other two popular Ifa-Oriṣa divination forms—Ifa and eerindinlogun. I will examine the way in which the practice of divination is learned and taught, with attention to the kinesthetic and aural ways of knowing that are characteristic of the transmission of this knowledge and further develop the concept of the visual-oral-aural-kinesthetic (VOAK) complex.

Chapter three, *Of Water and Women: Obi and Feminine Power*, focuses on obi's connection with women and with the elements of water and earth, both of which embody the divine feminine. It will consider the role of gendered duality in Ifa-Oriṣa and will examine pertinent dimensions of intimate relationships—both between human beings and between the Oriṣa—and examine how tropes of sexuality and marriage are employed toward analytical ends.

Finally, Chapter four, *From Kola to Coco: Diasporic Change and Continuity*, speaks to the transformation of obi into the African Diaspora, with attention to the United States by way of Cuba. In the United States, as in Cuba, the word “obi” typically refers to cut or broken pieces of coconut meat which are used to divine and perform other functions in the way that kola nut is used in Yorubaland. While it has been informally theorized that the Yoruba and their descendants in the Americas chose coconut as a substitute for kola upon arrival in the Americas, therefore constituting a change, I will argue that this practice is continuous with continental practice, as coconut was and is used to communicate with particular deities. This section will examine the indexical nature of material relationships in Ifa-Oriṣa and present a comparative analysis of Yorubaland and Diasporic kola/coco divination and the meanings and uses of these two items in their respective contexts.

In the conclusion, I highlight to the implications of this study in the larger context of the study of African and Diasporic religions and will also highlight some considerations for further study.

Humidity and the buzz of a generator hung in the air and darkness had not long since fallen, marking the period of *alẹ* (night) on May 5, 2015. It was the first evening of *itefa* (Ifa initiation) for Oyafemi, an African-American woman who had arrived in the city of Ibadan in Oyo State, Nigeria from Denver, Colorado just a few days before. She and I were seated on the floor of a room in a small, traditionally constructed building—marked by one long hallway through the center of the structure with a door to the outside at either end and a few rooms on each side of the corridor—waiting as patiently as we could for the ceremony to begin. So much of Ifa-Orisha ritual time is marked by waiting; it is no wonder that *suuru ni baba iwa* (“patience is the father of character”) is one of the most commonly recited refrains of Ifa.

Finally, the moment had arrived. The room suddenly erupted with motion: voices rose and fell, some people came in and others exited, items were passed in and out of the space, there was shouting and questioning—a full showing of what Kimberley C. Patton has referred to as “ritual anxiety.” Then, just as quickly as the action had begun, it settled down and we sat again in relative quiet as Baba Ifayemi Abidemi, the officiant of the ceremony, explained to Oyafemi what she was to do to begin. As an American who had not previously been to Nigeria and who is not fluent in Yoruba, some of what was being said escaped her and she looked mildly disoriented. I looked at her with a pleasant nostalgia, recollecting my first time in such a space, sitting where she sat now, and I gently reassured her with soft eyes and subtle nods that all would be well.

The room was filled with about fifteen *babalawo* (priests of Ifa, lit. father of hidden knowledge) and *oloriṣa* (priests of various Orisha, lit. owner of orisha) including

me, as I was to serve as the *iyanifa* (Ifa priestess; lit. mother who has Ifa) for the ceremony. Oyafemi's first order of business was to approach each of us with an offering and *kunle* (kneel) before us, beseeching us to sanction the ceremony and add our *aṣẹ* (spiritual power) to it with a prayer for its success. At each pass, the offering was placed in a calabash which she then lifted onto her head as she knelt at the entrance to the room. She would then rise and approach one priest, deliver the offering, and accept his or her prayer before returning to her original position to refill the calabash for the next person.

I was the third to receive this sacred payment; when my turn came, Oyafemi stood up and traversed the small room with just a few steps, and then, kneeling before me, she handed me the contents of the calabash—two *obi abata* (4-lobed kola nuts) and one 50-naira³⁹ bill—with both hands as she spoke:

“*Iyanifa mi,*” she said, halting over the foreign words that she had just learned minutes before, speaking each one slowly and deliberately. “*Mo fe ṣe Ifa mi.*”

My Iyanifa, I want to make my Ifa.

I accepted the offering with both hands and began to pray. When I closed the prayer with an “*aṣẹ,*” she rose and then repeated the process, approaching each of the other priests in turn until she had distributed all the *obi* and money. With this, she had paid her way into the *igbodu* (initiation grove) and I rose to accompany her, my first *omo awo* (junior priest initiated under one), to the entrance.



³⁹ Approximately 25 cents USD in May 2015.

Reciprocity and flora are two integral pillars which support Ifa-Oriṣa practice. Each ritual action, no matter how large or small, adds a link to what Stephan Palmié refers to as the “chain of reciprocal prestation”—whereby practitioners nourish the various oriṣa with whom they have entered into relationships in exchange for their assistance and favor⁴⁰—and most all acts that build this chain require the use of one or more botanical elements. So vital are these elements to the practice that an oft-cited proverb declares, *ko si ewe, ko si oriṣa* (without plants, there are no oriṣa).

Due to the centrality of plants in Ifa-Oriṣa and other African and diasporic religions, a good deal of scholarship has been devoted to their use. One of the best-known treatises on the topic, Pierre Verger’s magnum opus *Ewe: The Use of Plants in Yoruba Society*, highlights approximately 3,500 plants used by the Yoruba, each of which is thought to have its own unique *aṣẹ* (energy, potentiality, power) in addition to its chemical properties. Because of their varying *aṣẹ*, George Brandon notes that plants have “personality and temperament,” about which he says:

Some [plants] are easily frightened and therefore withhold their powers by refusing to bloom. Others are retiring and shy. Others have brittle, explosive personalities and require the utmost in etiquette and respect before being picked. If not pampered, others will simply hide the next time you want to find them.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 166.

⁴¹ George Brandon, “The Uses of Plants in Healing in an Afro-Cuban Religion, Santería,” *Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 1 (1991), 58.

It is the personality of each plant, undergirded by its *aṣẹ*, that renders it sacred—or taboo, or inert—to one or more *oriṣa* and which makes plants indispensable to the performance of Ifa-*Oriṣa* ritual. During the most important rites, for example, an herbal infusion known as *omi ẹro* (lit. cool water)—also sometimes called *Osanyin*, in honor of the *oriṣa* considered the owner of all plants—is used to bathe both sacred implements and practitioners’ bodies. *Omi ẹro* typically employs no less than eight different plants, with some mixtures boasting 21 or more. Each of the leaves, herbs, weeds, or roots is chosen for the specific *aṣẹ* it adds to the mix and each concoction is curated for the particular *oriṣa* with whose energy it is intended to interact.

Aside from the particular plants and mixtures in which each *oriṣa*’s devotees and implements are bathed, each also has favored plant foods: pounded white yam (*iyán*) for *Ọbatalá*, dried yam flour (*amala*) and bitter kola (*orogbo*) for *Ṣàngo*, ground black-eyed peas (*akara*) for the ancestors, groundnuts (*epa*) for *Ogun*, and a particular leafy vegetable (*yanrin*) for *Ọṣun*, to name but a few. As humans must nourish themselves with food, so must they nourish the spirits and providing an *oriṣa* with his or her preferred foods is one of the most frequent means through which practitioners build the reciprocal chain between themselves and the *oriṣa*. As Elizabeth Pérez notes, feeding the spirits is a means through which practitioners traverse the gulf thought to separate the divine other from the human self.⁴² While it is understood the *oriṣa* are immaterial and omnipresent, as their energy is thought to traverse the spirit-material barrier to become enshrined in

⁴² Pérez, 57.

materials like rocks, water, and human bodies, it also traverses the boundary in order to partake of physical food offerings. A large part of becoming a proficient devotee, therefore, is learning the indexical relationships between the orisha and their flora as well as how to activate or prepare the flora for use either through processing, incantation (*ofò*), prayer (*ewure*) or—most frequently—a combination these.⁴³

While there a distinction is made between those plants that operate via direct biological stimulation and those that work via the alteration of *aṣẹ*, as with many aspects of the Yoruba world-sense, the distinction is not absolute. Whether they act biologically, spiritually, or both most all plants—from the edible to the poisonous, whether from the highest tree or the lowest bush—are valuable. There is one, however, that stands alone as the favored food of the orisha, the medium through which humans and orisha are able to communicate, and the currency with which one might pay any number of cosmic and terrestrial debts: *obi*, known in English as kola nut.⁴⁴

Obi exemplifies what Jennifer Hughes refers to as a vital materialist ontology, whereby it cannot and should not be understood primarily as an object, but instead as an active participant Ifa-Orisha religio-social networks.⁴⁵ Coming to this understanding requires a scholarly renegotiation of the categories being used to engage cultural

⁴³ Processing might entail cooking, burning, grinding, or any number of other means of changing the plant from its original form.

⁴⁴ I will use *obi* and kola nut interchangeably throughout this work.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Schepher Hughes. “Mysterium Materiae: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion.” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, vol. 41, No. 4, November 2012), 17.

phenomena, like obi, which do not fit squarely into the categories of “matter” and “being” to which Western-trained scholars are most accustomed. Hughes notes:

Rather than systematically imposing Western ontological categories on religious and cultural phenomena that can hardly be encompassed adequately within these parameters, scholars might manifest an openness or willingness to revise or suspend these ontological understandings when confronting cultural systems that contrast starkly with Western philosophical norms. That is, placing vital objects of material religion at the center of analysis compels us to reconsider our own culturally bounded and possibly erroneous ontological assumptions about the distinction between objects and persons, between matter and being.⁴⁶

As she further explains how to go about negotiating these categories and distinctions, Hughes invokes Jane Bennett’s concept of *distributive agency*, whereby human-object relationships are considered along a horizontal axis, whereby human beings and sacred objects form assemblages and confederate with one another, rather than a vertical axis whereby humans simply “impose their will and desires upon mute, passive, and pliant objects.” With this shift in perspective, sacred objects transcend the characterization as “evidence,” becoming subject-actors within communities of practice.⁴⁷ Many of the sacred objects used within Ifa-Orisa religion rest squarely in the category of subject-actors as they are recognized as having will, agency, and the power to affect change in the world around them.

In addition to its identity as a botanical object and food item, obi is also considered a feminine deity in her own right, one of the primordial beings known in

⁴⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 20.

Yoruba as *irunmole*. Its divine character, personality, and temperament are thought to result in its unique ability to avert death and sickness, making obi a frequent offering to the orisha and also empowering it to act as their tongue, allowing them to pass their messages on to humans through the performance of obi divination. Like the orisha with whom obi is used to communicate, obi is a powerful copresence that permeates the lives of Ifa-Orisha devotees. Aisha Beliso-De Jesús uses the term *copresences* to refer to a multiplicity of beings that are spiritually engaged in a number of ways, including through the practice of divination.⁴⁸ As a copresence, even when using obi or divination, practitioners engage her not simply as a tool used facilitating communication with the ancestors and orisha, but as an interlocutor who acts in concert with these divine beings. As a divine being herself, obi is a translator who receives messages and uses her body interprets them into visible language. While obi's physical life is short, as each material instantiation is used only once, she is also everlasting as she embodies, presents, and represents the universal cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of Ifa-Orisha cosmology and then introduces the reader to obi, discussing both her terrestrial and mythological origins, the attributes that lend to her unique character as an intercessor with the *ajogun* (enemies of life, lit. warlords) of death and illness, and the other duties she performs both physically

⁴⁸ Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 9.

and spiritually. The central question this chapter addresses is: What is it about the obi that makes it unique and exalted among other plants?

The Elastic Ifa-Oriṣa Cosmos

To appreciate obi's place within Ifa-Oriṣa world-sense, it is necessary to first understand certain aspects of Ifa-Oriṣa cosmology. The Yoruba describe a spherical universe—which they liken to the shape of a calabash—split into vertical halves with the top half, *orun*, being the spiritual world, and the bottom half, *aiye*, being the physical world. The universe is again divided into horizontal halves with 400 + 1 constructive beings on the right side and 200 + 1 destructive beings on the left. It is important to note that this “+ 1” does not mean to add one additional being to each side, rather, it is more accurate to use the mathematical concept of “+1 *ad infinitum*” meaning that the operation is repeated to infinity. This indicates that there is an infinite number of beings, as well as the continued possibility of the discovery or creation of new beings.⁴⁹ It is precisely this elasticity within the Ifa-Oriṣa cosmos that allowed the Yoruba to adopt and adapt—for good or ill—the new spiritual beings and concepts introduced to them through outside contact. Though many scholars have described the energies on the right side of the cosmos as “benevolent” and the beings on the left as “malevolent,” I prefer to use the terms *constructive* and *destructive*

⁴⁹ Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*. (Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006), 29. This number has been cited in a number of ways, including as 401, 201, and 200+1. The positioning is also somewhat ambiguous as the prayer

when referencing the right and the left, respectively, and will use these terms throughout this analysis.

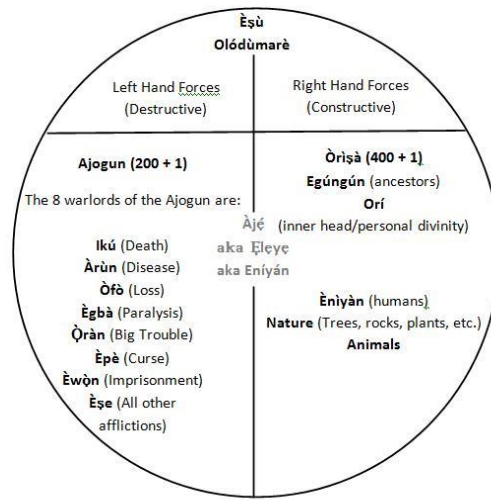
Drawing on Yoruba sacred narratives, Wande Abimbola describes the Ifa-Oriṣa cosmos as a “crowded and elastic mythical alphabet.”⁵⁰ The cosmos is described as crowded because of the multitude of spiritual beings which are thought to inhabit it, and as elastic because the number of spiritual beings is ever-changing and can never truly be known. These spiritual beings include the *eegun* (ancestors), *irunmole* (primordial divinities), *oriṣa* (divinized human beings), and the *ajogun* (destructive forces) with the *eegun*, *irunmole*, and *oriṣa* being the primary foci of Ifa-Oriṣa worship.⁵¹ Oft-described as “divinities” or “forces of nature,” the *oriṣa* are this and much more, at once tangible entities and intangible ideological constructs around which life is organized. They are, to use Paget Henry’s words, “both immanent and transcendent,” standing simultaneously within and without the universal milieu of time and space.⁵² While each *oriṣa* inhabits

⁵⁰ Wande Abimbola, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora* (Roxbury, MA: Aim Books, 1997), 3.

⁵¹ Though the terms “*irunmole*” and “*oriṣa*” are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a distinction between these two groups of entities. The *irunmole* are spiritual entities created directly by Olodumare, whereas *oriṣa* are beings who were once human and who, through their deeds and strengths, became exalted as deities. This is in a similar vein to Catholic saints and may be yet another reason why a melding took place between the *oriṣa* and Catholic saints when Ifa-Oriṣa was introduced into the Americas. While some *oriṣa* are also *irunmole*, not all *irunmole* come to earth in physical form. As with many aspects of religion, there are conflicting reports as to which *oriṣa* are also *irunmole*. For example, some knowledge-keepers say that *Ṣango* was not worshipped as a divinity until after him having been the third *alaafin* (king) of the *Oyo* empire, and others say that there was an *irunmole* *Ṣango* after whom the king was named. This distinction has been explained to me by several knowledgeable practitioners including Babalawo Oluwole Ifakunle Adetutu Alagbede and Babalawo Ifayemi Abidemi Fakayode, both of whom were the students of Awise Wande Abimbola. This distinction is important because while *obi* is referenced as *irunmole*, having never been a human being, she is not referenced as an *oriṣa*.

⁵² Paget Henry, “African and Afro-Caribbean Existential Philosophies.” In *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, Lewis Gordon, ed., (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 19.

specific physical domains, they also exist as philosophical archetypes that articulate with one another through mythical interaction.



Adapted by Funlayo E. Wood from Kólá Abimbòla. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. (Birmingham, Great Britain: Iròkò Academic Publishers, 2006), 70.

Figure 1

The image above (Figure 1) is a cosmogram—or visual representation—of the Ifa-Oriṣa cosmos. The Supreme Being or, perhaps more accurately, the Supreme *Force* in Yoruba conception is called Olodumare. Rather than a sentient, anthropomorphized figure like most of the other entities in the Yoruba cosmos, Olodumare is often conceived of as pure energy and potentiality—known in Yoruba as *aṣẹ*.⁵³ Of *aṣẹ*, Margaret Thompson Drewal remarks:

...*aṣẹ* has no moral connotations; it is neither good nor bad. Rather, it is a generative force or potential present in all things—rocks, hills, streams, mountains, plants, animals,

⁵³ Prince ‘Wale Egberongbe, *African Traditional Religion: We Are No Pagans* (Lagos, Nigeria: Nelson Publishers Limited, 2003), 22.

ancestors, deities—and in utterances—prayers, songs, curses and even every day speech.⁵⁴

Following with the conception of being composed of pure *aṣe*, which is genderless, and due to the lack of gendered pronouns in the Yoruba language, Olodumare was customarily referred to as being gender-neutral.⁵⁵ Given the customary treatment, feminist sociologist Oyeronke Oyewunmi, has questioned and critiqued the tendency of referring to Olodumare as “He” when using gendered languages such as English. While there she takes this masculinization of Olodumare as an indication of the influence of Christianity—in which the Supreme Being is decidedly male—and Western gender categories on concepts within Ifa-Oriṣa and Yoruba culture more broadly, others point to the patriarchal nature of Yoruba society and posit that, had Yoruba language gendered pronouns, the masculine pronoun would likely have been used.⁵⁶ These two positions notwithstanding, in obeisance to the original concept which is ungendered, I will employ the use of the non-gendered third-

⁵⁴ Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 27.

⁵⁵For more on this concept cf. K. Abombola, 59; Egberongbe, 19.

⁵⁶ See Oyeronke Oyewunmi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) in which she refers not only to the masculinization of Olodumare but also the change of “our ancestors” to “our forefathers” and other changes in language which reflect the distinctly masculine bias in Christianity. Jacob K. Olupona makes room for the possibility that this masculinization came as a result of the influence of Christianity but also points to the patriarchal nature of Yoruba culture to infer that the view of Olodumare may have always been somewhat masculine although gendered pronouns were not used (personal communication, November 2010). I tend to agree—in contrast to the ideas presented by Oyewunmi—that the lack of gendered pronouns does not indicate a lack of conception about gender difference. Still, I prefer not to impose masculinity on the concept of Olodumare.

person plurals “they,” “them,” and “their” rather than using “he,” “him,” and “his” when making reference to Olodumare.⁵⁷

In examining the cosmogram, one will notice that Olodumare is not on the constructive right side or the destructive left side of the representation, but in the middle. This indicates that Olodumare is neither solely constructive nor destructive, but exists outside of either of these conceptions—but is, at the same time, integrated into both—with the potential to create and destroy. As the original source, Olodumare is thought to have supplied *aṣẹ* to both the right side and the left side of the universe creating an ever-present dynamic tension. Light and darkness—terms which serve the same analogical function as creative and destructive—are in a consistent relationship in the Ifa-Oriṣa cosmological schema. Likewise, within each individual light and darkness converge and struggle, recreating within each person a microcosm of the cosmos.

Wande Abimbola points out that there is never a completely peaceful coexistence between the powers of light and dark and that conflict, rather than peace, is the norm. To use his words:

There is nothing you can do without being in conflict with something or someone else. When you eat breakfast, lunch, or dinner, you have not only been in conflict, you have perhaps taken the lives of some other things in the universe.

⁵⁷ Aside from removing the gendered aspect of the pronoun, the use of “they,” “them,” “their” and “theirs” more accurately aligns with Yoruba language in which the third person plural *won* is used as an honorific title when referring to an individual who is elder and/or of higher status than oneself. While the singular “they” has been in use in English since the 14th century, it has typically been considered grammatically incorrect. The use of the singular “they” and its derivatives has, however, recently been formally accepted the English language as an alternative to the awkward formations of “he or she,” “him or her,” and “his or hers” by publications including the New York Times and Washington Post, and was declared word of the year for 2015 by the American Dialect Society.

When you step out of your car, when you trim your lawn, you might have killed insects, plants, and other tiny creatures.⁵⁸

This short passage helps to clarify my use of the terms *constructive* and *destructive*, rather than *benevolent* and *malevolent*, which Abimbola himself employs, in speaking about the energies that inhabit the cosmos. While the use of the former terms reinforces the oft-cited—and oft-contested—philosophical dichotomy between forces of “good” and forces of “evil,” the latter terms recognize the reality that destruction is not necessarily an “evil,” but is a natural and necessary part of existence. As noted in the passage, we eat to sustain ourselves; in that process, we destroy plants and, perhaps, animals. Is eating, then, an evil action? Most all would agree that it is not. There are, of course, varying degrees of destruction that individuals find acceptable. For this reason, many people don’t engage in the killing of animals for food, but even they must still kill plants and so are not exempt from being destructive agents on a daily basis. To be clear, use of the constructive-destructive schema rather than that of benevolence and malevolence, does not at all dismiss the possibility of ill-intention. It does, however, offer more nuance and help to illuminate what Babalola Joseph Balogun refers to as the consequentialist foundation of Yoruba ethics in which something considered “good” is typically considered so because it is primarily

⁵⁸ W. Abimbola, 3.

constructive or contributory and something considered “bad” is characterized as such because it is primarily destructive or damaging.⁵⁹

The concept of the semi-neutral space in which Olodumare and Eṣu exist greatly benefits from the shift away from the benevolent/malevolent dyad and sits in stark contrast to notions of “good” and “evil” having two separate sources—the former being of a benevolent creator, who is thought purely “good,” and the latter being of an agent of pure “evil.”⁶⁰ Though the idea of benevolence and malevolence, construction and destruction, emanating from the same source has often led to oversimplification of Yoruba and other African world-senses, Albert J. Raboteau asserts that rather than being simplistic, the refusal of Africans to accept strict dichotomies of good and evil points to a high level of sophistication of thought.⁶¹ The sensibility of the single-source concept is evident when pondered in terms of a scientific analogy: nuclear energy. Examining nuclear energy, it is clear to see how the same forces can be both immensely constructive and utterly destructive. While scientists point to nuclear fusion as the most efficient power-generating source on earth, holding the potential to produce an almost limitless supply of energy, the resistance to its use lies in its massive powers of destruction. Just as it can create vaster constructive power than most anything else, it can also be more

⁵⁹ Babalola Joseph Balogun, “The Consequentialist Foundation of Traditional Yoruba Ethics: An Exposition.” *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophic Association of Kenya*. Vol. 5, No. 2, December 2013, 103-121.

⁶⁰ I say semi-neutral because it is generally agreed that both Olodumare and Eṣu are more often constructive than destructive, but it is well understood that they each have the potential for both.

⁶¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 50.

thoroughly destructive than most anything else. Although some choose to see only one aspect of the energy's potential without acknowledging the other, the fact that they coexist remains.

In considering Olodumare, it is noteworthy that scholars point to Yoruba contact with Christianity and Islam—and the work of African Christian scholars like Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti—contributing to an overemphasis of the Supreme Being's centrality in African religions as practiced. While Olodumare is understood to be the divine source of all that exists, the Yoruba do not traditionally interact directly with them, nor are they thought to be the agent directly responsible for physical creation. As aforementioned, Olodumare is conceived of as pure *aṣẹ*; they are therefore considered too raw and powerful to have direct contact with human beings. It is, in fact traditionally considered quite arrogant for a human to believe that he or she has any kind of special relationship with Olodumare.⁶² For this reason, no sacrifices are offered to Olodumare and there are no temples dedicated to them though there are some songs that are thought to refer to Olodumare and the standard *ijuba* (prayer, lit. paying of homage) recited by Ifa-Oriṣa devotees begins with “Iba Olodumare.”

Rather than direct contact and interaction with humanity, Yoruba theology posits that Olodumare distributed manageable portions of their *aṣẹ* among the 400 + 1 creative forces on the right side of the cosmos—which include the *oriṣa* and other entities—and charged those creative forces with the task of crafting the earth and human beings and,

⁶² W. Abimbolá, 3.

subsequently, attending to human need. Understanding the necessity for both creation and destruction within a physical universe, Olodumare also dispersed a portion of their aṣẹ to the 200 + 1 destructive forces on the left of the cosmos and, because both sides of the cosmos receive their aṣẹ from Olodumare, neither side can annihilate the other. The aim, therefore, is for the two sides to remain in the proper balance such that creation is maintained. It is noteworthy that there are twice as many constructive forces as destructive ones; although both sides have the +1 ad infinitum potentiality for growth, the fact that the right side starts off with twice as many means that, if both sides grow at similar rates, the right side will always have more aṣẹ. For any physical manifestation to take place, it stands to reason that the constructive forces would have to outnumber destructive ones; were the destructive more numerous, or even if the constructive and destructive were even, creation and maintenance of the physical world would not be possible.

Another pertinent point of Ifa-Oriṣa cosmology that will assist in understanding the importance of obi is what I refer to as *Layers of Proximity*. The cosmogram to the right (Figure 2) is a simplified depiction of Yoruba sacred cosmology. In the anthropocentric fashion that is common to many indigenous systems, eniyan (human beings) appear at the center. While some scholars have questioned indigenous people's anthropocentrism, it is not only logical, but a distinctly philosophical exercise to begin an inquiry from one's own point

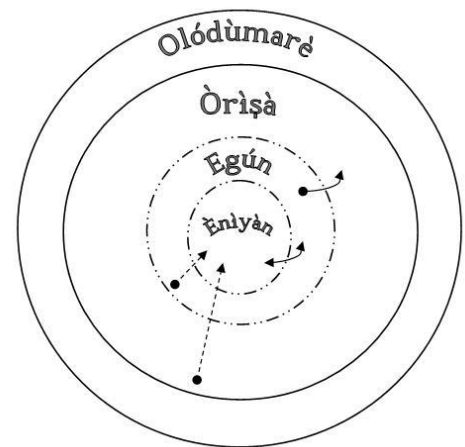


Figure 2: Cosmogram showing Layers of Proximity between various constructive forces.
By Funlayo E. Wood.

of view, as this is the only point of view from which one can speak with any semblance of authority. Starting from one's own positionality and reflecting outward is the epitome of reflecting on reality; starting from the outside would not seem, in the strictest sense of the word, to be reflection. The inside-out orientation is in contrast to the top-down or outside-in perspective favored by the Abrahamic religions which, according to Kwame Gyekye, "come from up and look down" while African indigenous religions "come from down and look up."⁶³ While I agree with the sentiment of Gyekye's observation, of note is his use of the terms "up" and "down" which seem to indicate that humans are "down" and the divine is "up." I choose to use the terms *inside* and *out* in my analysis and to reject his terms *up* and *down* as, per Yoruba religious philosophy—and other indigenous philosophies—the divine is not *above* humans but all *around* them.

In considering the cosmogram above (figure 2), the salience of the concept of layers of proximity comes to the fore. Observers of Ifa-Oriṣa practices have often remarked that eegun (ancestors) and the oriṣa (divinities) are thought "more important" than Olodumare. This statement was often a result of the fact that, as aforementioned, Yoruba do not generally direct their praise and worship directly at Olodumare; they instead propitiate the many forces on the right side of the cosmos in an attempt to ensure that the creative forces remain more powerful and numerous than the destructive forces on the left. The left is never directly propitiated; instead, the divine messenger Eṣu, mentioned above, ensures that those forces get their due. While Olodumare is clearly acknowledged and recognized as the source of all aṣe, the aṣe they instilled into the

⁶³ Personal communication, University of Legon, Accra Ghana, June 2008.

creative forces on the right side of the cosmos is specifically intend for human interaction; humans honor that intention—and protect themselves from Olodumare’s overwhelmingly potent aṣẹ—by interfacing with the creative forces rather than directly with Olodumare. As all the creative forces work together in the maintenance of life, the Yoruba would not likely characterize any one creative entity as “more important” than another as they recognize that all are necessary to sustain the balance of universe and humans within it. Drawing on another natural analogy, we recognize that the brain is the “control center” of the body, but we would never say that the brain is “above” the heart and the lungs, as the body cannot function without any of these components.

Returning to the cosmogram (Figure 2), within the layer closest to eniyan (humans) are the eegun (ancestors): departed spirits that have undergone certain processes during life and death in order to become exalted. It is noteworthy that other departed spirits—which are not considered eegun—also exist within this realm of being, but they are not included in the diagram as they are not central to this discussion. As shown in the cosmogram, the eegun are considered the closest to eniyan; it therefore stands to reason that they would command the most attention. The odù Ifá Ogunda Qwónrin states:

<i>Baba eni aṣeṣe eni</i>	One’s father is one’s aṣeṣe
<i>Iya eni aṣeṣe eni</i>	One’s mother is one’s aṣeṣe
<i>Ori eni aṣeṣe eni</i>	One’s orí is one’s aṣeṣe
<i>Ikin eni aṣeṣe eni</i>	One’s ikin is one’s aṣeṣe
<i>Aṣeṣe mọmọ laa bo</i>	It is the aṣeṣe one would first sacrifice to
<i>Ka too boriṣa</i>	Before sacrificing to [Oriṣa] ⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Ayo Salami. *Ifá: A Complete Divination* (Lagos, Nigeria: NIDD Publishing and Printing Limited, 2002), 474.

The word *aṣeṣe* (also *iṣeṣe*) is translated in many ways. One of the translations is “our root and the leader of all rituals on earth”⁶⁵ and another is “tradition and culture.” Using these translations, one’s parents—and by extension eegun—as well as one’s own personal oriṣa, known as *orí*, and one’s *ikin*, the sacred palm nuts used to perform divination and reveal destiny, are a person’s leaders and the keepers of tradition and culture that allow a person to exist on earth. One’s relationship with one’s parents and, by extension, one’s eegun is more pressing and immediate than one’s relationship with any other divinity. Although humans are, mythically speaking, said to be shaped by oriṣa Obatala and given the breath of life (*emi*) by Olodumare, without parents—particularly one’s mother, who acts as the portal—who are directly physically responsible for bringing human beings to earth and sustaining us, we would not exist. In addition to having sustained the earth and having lived their lives in such a way as to pave the way for our parents’ existence and ours in turn, as the Yoruba believe that the soul lives on after death, it is thought that the eegun continue to interact with and exert influence on the living. Recalling the +1 *ad infinitum* potentiality on both sides of the cosmos, the notion is that if not properly propitiated, a departed spirit may move to the left and become a destructive force, working against its progeny, rather than a creative force working for them. Furthermore, the importance placed on respecting and honoring one’s parents and ancestors is logically sound in that one cannot, ostensibly, respect, honor and propitiate that which is unseen, not perceived with the senses only interacted with

⁶⁵ Ibid.

spiritually—such as the oriṣa—if one is unwilling to respect, honor and propitiate one’s parents, and by extension one’s eegun, with whom he or she has interacted on both a spiritual and sensory level.⁶⁶

In addition to these esoteric and cosmological considerations of ancestral veneration and the importance of elders and ancestors in the cosmic order, there is a practical consideration as well. E. O. Babalola posits that despite the obvious necessity for science and technology in society, morality is as integral to the social project as either of those elements.⁶⁷ Whether the morality is secular or religiously inspired, it is as necessary as—if not more so than—the physical advances made possible by science and technology. Eegun are often thought to be the keepers and the enforcers of community morality and their role is, therefore, immediately imperative to the social project. The fact that the eegun are the enforcers of the morality and order necessary for humans to live and thrive increases their perceived proximity to humans and further solidifies the cosmological relationship between the two.

The oriṣa—who occupy the next closest layer to eniyan in the cosmogram—are, arguably the most studied entities within the Yoruba cosmos. Often referred to simply to as “spirits” representing the “forces of nature,” they are this and more. The oriṣa are spiritual-philosophical archetypes which, taken together, represent the fullness that is all of creation including not only the forces of nature as physical manifestations, but also

⁶⁶ This is similar to the biblical adage in I John 4:20 that one cannot love God, who they have not seen, while hating one’s brother or sister, who they have seen.

⁶⁷ E. O. Babalola, *Studies in the Theology and Sociology of Yoruba Indigenous Religion* (Lagos, Nigeria: Concept Publications, 2002), 14.

abstract concepts such as truth, justice, humility, direction, creativity, and many others.

Gary Edwards and John Mason refer to the orisha as “specialized forms” or portions of Olodumare and explain them thusly:

The Yoruba believe that [Olodumare] is too vast an idea to comprehend. So [they] pick a portion of [Olodumare]—an orisha— and [try], through comprehension of the part, gain knowledge of the whole... [W]hen we say that the Yoruba are nature worshippers, we don't mean [it] in the narrow sense of the term. What the Yoruba worship is the essence of [Olodumare] in these portions of nature.⁶⁸

In following with the idea of the divine being around—rather than above—humans, the orisha do not, with the exception of Şango, the orisha of thunder and lightning, live in the sky. Instead it is thought that after being dispatched by Olodumare from orun and completing their assigned tasks on earth, the majority of them went into the crust of the earth and now manifest themselves on the surface of the earth as natural phenomenon like rivers, mountains, fire and wind. In addition to its elemental domain, each orisha is also represented by various animals, colors and other avatars. As elucidated by Edwards and Mason above, the association of the orisha with a particular phenomenon, animal or color does not imply that those objects or concepts *are* the orisha but that there is some aspect of the object or concept that embodies a *quality* of the orisha, which may be physical or philosophical. The complex form of Yoruba analogical thought used to bind the orisha with

⁶⁸ Gary Edwards and John Mason. 1985. *Black Gods: Orişsa Studies in the New World* (New York: Yorubá Theological Archministry), 4.

their manifold representations is a subject in need of more detailed examination that exceeds the scope of this analysis.

Returning to the idea of proximity, by virtue of being in and on the earth, the orisha are physically close to humans, forming the habitat in which humans live and providing necessities like water and plant life. Mythically, the very bodies of the first humans' bodies are conceived of as having been crafted by the orisha: it is theorized that Ogun supplied the skeleton; Obatala sculpted the flesh, and Olodumare then provided the breath of life, *emi*. This is significant in that it indicates discernment of the material nature of the body, crafted by the orisha who are in charge of the material world, in contrast to the ethereal nature of the *aṣẹ* of the spirit provided by Olodumare. The earth, itself, is conceived of as a female divinity who is called by the appellation of *ilẹ ogeṣere a f'okọ yeri* and prayers and sacrifices are frequently made to her.⁶⁹ The ground-up orientation that these concepts of the orisha indicate is salient when working from an anthropomorphic perspective because people live on the ground; the concept of gravity and the fact that human beings are literally *bound* to the earth makes this perspective even more relevant: in being physically bound to the earth, we're also spiritually bound to the energies that exist within the earth. This is exemplified in the practice of pouring of libation, or liquid offerings—usually water or some form of fermented, alcoholic beverage—onto the ground, which again refers to the pull of energy inward and downward. Libation is often poured to the eegun, who are not only buried in the ground, but whose spirits are thought to reside there as well, as well as in propitiation of the earth

⁶⁹ W. Abimbola, 69.

herself. This act of libation-pouring also reenacts the falling of rain, which is necessary for the growth of the plants that sustain life and spirit.

Another take on the proximity of the eegun and the oriṣa to eniyan (humans) as contrasted with Olodumare is the metaphysical concept of *becoming*. If humans conduct themselves in a constructive manner during life and have good deaths, they may eventually become eegun.⁷⁰ As alluded to above, death alone does not exalt a person and turn him or her into an ancestor; there is a process through which the ancestral transition takes place.⁷¹ Certain eegun who are particularly exalted, like Ṣango a former alaafin (ruler) of the Oyo Empire, may become oriṣa. The possibility for a human to become eegun and eegun to become oriṣa is reflected in the +1 *ad infinitum* potentiality on the right side of the universe and the notion of this possibility is codified in the odu Ifa Iwori Odi which says: “There is no child-bearing woman that cannot give birth to an Ifa priest. There is no child-bearing woman that cannot give birth to Orunmila.” This verse of Iwori Odi indicates that any woman has the potential to birth a person who will become important (like an Ifá priest, if not necessarily so) and even to birth an oriṣa (Orunmila). That the name of Orunmila, the oriṣa of destiny, is used in this example is not coincidental; it is an allusion to the fact that becoming an important person or an oriṣa would not be a happenstance occurrence but would only take place as a part of a person’s

⁷⁰ There are several aspects to a “good” death including being of a certain age, having had children and having died of natural causes. There is, however, some debate as to whether those who have died of unnatural causes such as disease or accidents may, too, become exalted through the ritual actions of their descendants.

⁷¹ Babalola, 15.

destiny—destiny which is conceived of as being chosen by the individual at the “feet” of Olodumare before crossing into the realm of physical existence in a process called *ikunleyan* (lit. kneeling to choose).

While it is possible for humans to become eegun and eegun to become oriṣa it is never, under any circumstances, possible for a human being—or even an oriṣa—to become Olodumare. Nor is it possible for Olodumare to directly inhabit the bodies of humans in the way that eegun and oriṣa sometimes do through the process of spirit possession. Although it is understood that the primordial aṣẹ of Olodumare runs through all things in the universe, including humans, people do not become possessed by Olodumare in the way that they may become possessed by an eegun or oriṣa. Returning to the proximity cosmogram (Figure 2), the broken, and permeable boundaries separating the layers of humans, eegun and oriṣa indicate that the separation between these layers is not fixed and that movement between these layers is possible and expected. The solid boundary between Olodumare and the rest of the layers represented in the cosmogram is indicative of the metaphysical boundary between them, of the impossibility of becoming. While Olodumare, being the outermost layer, contains all and is in no way separate from any, the type of direct transference that is thought to take place between the other entities in the cosmogram does not take place with Olodumare.

The arrows in the cosmogram are representative of metaphysical transformations. The double-headed arrow between eniyan and eegun represents two-way movement between those realms; eniyan may become eegun after death, and eegun in turn may re-become eniyan, re-live, through the process of reincarnation. It is noteworthy that in the Yoruba conception, reincarnation may only take place within the same familial line, which

highlights the importance of leaving descendants on the earth. The single headed arrow between the eegun and the oriṣa represents one-way movement between those realms: an exalted eegun may become an oriṣa and, although still considered eegun in a primordial sense, the eegun that has transcended to the realm of oriṣa would not return to the realm of eegun. The broken-lined, single-headed arrows going from the layers of eegun and oriṣa to the layer of eniyan represents the ability for the eegun and the oriṣa to temporarily physically enter the realm of eniyan through the phenomenon of spirit possession. The broken line represents the immediate, temporary nature of the inhabitation—which would last perhaps a few minutes to a few hours—while the solid lines of the aforementioned arrows, those between eniyan and eegun and eegun and oriṣa, represent a semi-permanent state lasting for many years, even into eternity.

Obi, as we will see below, is one of the 400 + 1 beings, or irunmole, thought to have received the constructive aṣe of Olodumare. Like Eṣu, she is a divine messenger believed to have the power to petition both sides of the cosmos, to bring the blessings and favor of the constructive forces while holding off the destructive. Her most crucial function is facilitating communication between human beings and those entities to whom they are most proximate, those able to inhabit their bodies and who they may one day become: ancestors and oriṣa. In what follows, we will learn more about this unique space that the obi occupies and the precise manner in which she fulfills these duties.

The Births of Obi: Earthly Origins

The kola “nut” is not a true botanical nut, but rather the seed of the kola tree which grows primarily in the middle belt of West Africa, with cultivation areas stretching from Senegal, through Ghana, into Nigeria and Niger with small pockets in Northwest Asia, parts of the Caribbean, and the Western United States. The majority of the world’s kola is grown in southwestern Nigeria and includes the variety known in Yoruba as *obi abata* (sci: *kola acuminata*), which is native to the region, and the variety known as *obi gbanja* or *goro* (sci: *kola nitida*) which arrived in Nigeria from the Gbanja territory of what is now Ghana sometime before the 18th Century.⁷² Both varieties of obi are referenced as “true kola” or “female” kola in contrast to the “male” bitter kola (*orogbo*, sci: *garcinia kola*)⁷³ which is also native to the region.⁷⁴

Kola belongs to the sterculiaceae order of plants which also includes cocoa. The two often grow in vicinity to one another and both remain important cash crops within Nigeria, which produces 5.9% of the world’s cocoa⁷⁵ and 70% of its kola.⁷⁶ Citing the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, a common refrain says that the Yoruba produce the

⁷² In this work, “kola” and “obi” will refer exclusively to the obi abata variety unless otherwise noted.

⁷³ Bitter kola also has uses in Ifa-Orisa religion; I will discuss this in chapter 2.

⁷⁴ “Cola Nut. (*Cola Acuminata*, R. Br.),” *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew) 1890, no. 47 (1890): 253–60, 254.

⁷⁵ “Cocoa Production in a Nutshell,” Make Chocolate Fair!, August 13, 2013, <https://makechocolatefair.org/issues/cocoa-production-nutshell>.

⁷⁶ E. U. Asogwa, et. al. “Kolanut production, processing and marketing in the South-eastern states of Nigeria,” *African Journal of Plant Science* Vol. 5(10), pp. 547-551, 27 September, 2011, 547.

kola, the Hausa consume kola, and the Igbo worship it, owing to the fact that it is harvested predominantly in the Yoruba-speaking southwest, much is exported to the Hausa north where men are said to have a piece constantly in their mouths, and it serves crucial social functions in the Igbo east.

A dicotyledonous plant, the kola's seed is split into at least two parts: the *nitida* variety always possesses two cotyledons (lobes or segments) while *acuminata* possesses between three and nine, with four or five cotyledons being most common.⁷⁷ The seeds grow in green to brownish pods that can range in size and shape from semi-spherical and about two inches in diameter to the size and shape of a large mango, with the smaller pods housing as few as one seed and the larger boasting upwards of ten (Figure 3). The pod has a natural seam which, left alone, would eventually separate and open on its own releasing the seeds into the ground to germinate. Pods that are harvested are typically delicately opened and the seeds removed and peeled by women using their hands and blunt knives so as to avoid damaging them. Inside the pod, each seed is shrouded in a thin white fiber, called a testa, which is similar in consistency to a rose petal; the scent of the veiled seed is quite sweet and rose-like though it takes on a slightly more astringent scent after this fiber is removed and as the seed dries (Figure 4, Figure 5).

⁷⁷ There is one monocotyledonous (unsegmented) variety of kola which is exceedingly botanically rare.



Figure 3: Two obi pods (photograph by author)



Figure 4: Obi pod opened at seam to show nuts inside; each is shrouded in white covering, known as the testa (photograph by author)



Figure 5: Obi abata. One unveiled (left), the other inside its testa (photograph by the author)

Obi, which novelist Esther Lamnyam refers to as “the heartbeat of west Africa,”⁷⁸ has long been lauded for its properties as a stimulant and appetite suppressant. The records of Islamic scholars as early as the 12th century made note of these characteristics, and between 1890 and the present, no less than 900 articles have been produced which describe, examine, or mention the obi and its functions in this regard. The kola, it was held, not only aroused the senses and staved off fatigue and hunger, but also seemingly increase an individual’s the strength and vitality. As well, like olives in the European

⁷⁸ Esther Lamnyam. “What is a Kola Nut,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-gRGJb4E18>, (April 8, 2013)

context, obi was also said to sweeten water and to enhance the flavor of any foods that follow its ingestion, so a small amount was frequently chewed before meals.⁷⁹

As British traders and slavers explored Africa from the mid seventeenth through early nineteenth century, they encountered obi and became familiar with its use. Subsequently, it traversed the Atlantic with them in the same way that corn, cassava, and other American flora traveled with the Portuguese in the opposite direction, arriving on the continent during the seventeenth century, and by 1890 obi had been domesticated in several tropical locales in the Western hemisphere.⁸⁰ The initial interest in growing the plant in the British slave-holding colonies was obvious: with something that could keep hunger at bay and provide energy, it might be possible to get more work out of enslaved people while feeding them less. As well, obi is known to be an antidote to poisoning, which was a central concern for slaveholders who feared being poisoned by those they held in bondage. Poisoning was a source of great anxiety and was punished harshly; more enslaved people were executed for poisoning—whether real or imagined—than for most any other offense and paranoia grew after the turn of the nineteenth century when the news of Haitian independence and rebellions like those staged by Denmark Vessey and Nat Turner spread.⁸¹

⁷⁹ “Cola Nut. (Cola Acuminata, R. Br.),” 254.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Yvonne Chireau. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 70.

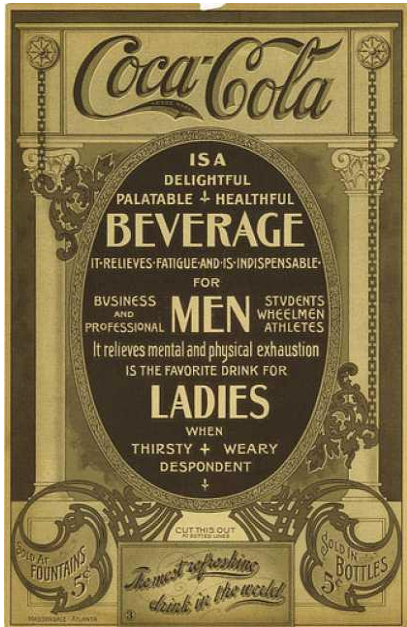


Figure 6: Vintage Coca-Cola ad specifying medicinal usage (public domain)

Slaveholders were far from the only ones who were interested in the potential of obi. Mark Pendergrast describes the nineteenth century United States as a “nation of neurotics” and notes that concern over “neurasthenia”—a new disease of the nerves thought to be caused by the overwork and mental strain that came with a rapidly modernizing country—led to a proliferation of “nerve tonics” intended to treat the condition.⁸² The most popular of these, Coca-Cola, was invented in May of 1886 by John Pemberton, described as a Southern medicine man obsessed with

creating the perfect medicine and drink to be served at the pharmacy soda fountains whose popularity had recently exploded.⁸³ Concurrent with the rise of the soda fountain, coca and kola nut came into popular use as “exotic” cure-alls—coca having come from Peru and kola having come from “Africa”—and were lauded for their ability to stave off fatigue and hunger, cure headache, mental and physical exhaustion, despondency in women, and also for their positive effect on men’s virility. While many nerve tonics of the time included similar ingredients, the top-secret formulation—known as X7—and unique taste of Coca-Cola was said to give it “unusual virtue” and, using advertisements

⁸² Mark Pendergrast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola: The Unauthorized History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It*, 1st Collier Books ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1994), 5.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 5.

which extolled this virtue, the drink grew in popularity. As well, the fact that Coca-Cola was nonalcoholic, unlike the coca wine on which the formulation was based, meant that it remained popular through the prohibition era. The success of Coca-Cola and the fact that it greatly enriched the men who acquired the formula from Pemberton—though, sadly, not Pemberton himself who died before the boom—elevated the beverage to a “kind of secular communion drink,” a sacrament to the growing doctrine of capitalism that was sweeping the nation. Banking on replicating this success, other cola formulations followed, with Pepsi-Cola emerging in 1893 and Royal Crown (RC) Cola in 1905. By 1928 all traces of coca leaf had been removed from Coca-Cola and, soon after, alternative, less expensive sources of flavor and caffeine were being used in its formulation, such that it was also devoid of kola nut. Despite this, the name Coca-Cola was retained as was the more general term “cola” for similar formulations in honor of the original source of their unique character. Today, cola beverages remain as popular as ever as does the Coca-Cola brand with “Coca-Cola” being the second most recognized word in the world after “OK.”⁸⁴

The Births of Obi: Heavenly Origins

Having gained a sense of obi’s place in the botanical world, we turn now to the sacred narratives that provide the deepest insight into its place in the cosmos. As with the

⁸⁴ Pendergrast, 8.

sacred knowledge of many religious traditions, Oludamini Ogunnaike notes that Ifa-Oriṣa’s knowledge keepers “transmit mythological narratives of Ifa that seem contradictory or seem to be variants of the same story without much cognitive dissonance.”⁸⁵ This is true regarding the divine origins of obi, as there are a number of stories about her and the exalted position she holds which vary particularly regarding whether this position is a gift or a punishment—the fact that she holds an exalted position is never in question.

One sacred narrative about the origin of obi tells us that there came a point in time at which Olodumare, the almighty God, became aware that the oriṣa were fighting against each other. They⁸⁶ called four of the oriṣa before them in *orun* (the abode of the spirits) to discuss the matter, with *Aiye* (earth) being the only female among the four. They began to discuss the fact that the youth seemed to no longer respect their elders and all agreed that this was a big problem which would lead to the breakdown of society if it remained unchecked. Olodumare was particularly bothered by this as they had decreed the respect of elders as a part of divine law. The oriṣa present began to pray fervently for the return of respect and peace, speaking their prayers loudly into the air, ringing their bells, clapping their hands, and stomping their feet.

As they were doing this, Olodumare grasped at the air with their two hands. In both the left and the right hands, they caught the air containing the prayers and, with

⁸⁵ Oludamini Ogunnaike. “Ifa and Sufism: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions.” (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University 2015), 313

⁸⁶ This dissertation uses the pronouns “they/them/theirs” when referring to Olodumare, as explained above.

hands tightly closed, they went outside and buried their hands in the divine soil releasing the prayers into its depths. The next day, a tree had sprouted in the very spot where Olodumare had released the prayers. The tree grew quickly and bore fruit, and when the fruit was ripe it began to fall to the ground. Aiye and the other deities present attempted to prepare the fruits in various ways, but each time found that the texture and taste of the roasted, or boiled, or fried fruits was unpleasant.

After some time and trials, Elenini, the orisha of obstacles, stepped forward and volunteered to keep all of the fruits until they could figure out what to do with them. She removed them from their pods, cleaned them, and wrapped them in leaves to keep them moist. After some days, she had the idea to try one, and she ate it raw. After eating them over the course of several days and feeling no ill effect—feeling better, in fact—she returned to Olodumare and the other orisha and advised them that the fruit of their prayers, which they called obi, should be eaten raw.

As obi had been born from prayers for the return of respect to the elders, Olodumare decreed that prayers should always come before the consumption of obi and that it should first be offered to the eldest person present. They further pronounced that the tree would only grow in places where the people respected their elders.

Olodumare took one obi and broke it and, finding that it had two pieces, gave one piece to Elenini in honor of her discovery and because she was the oldest divinity present. They picked up another obi and broke it; finding that it had three pieces they distributed them to the male deities present whose prayers Olodumare had caught and planted. They picked up and broke yet another, which had four pieces, the fourth piece given to Aiye, the only female orisha present during the prayers. The next obi contained five pieces, the

fifth piece representing Oriṣa-Nla, the great oriṣa. The final obi had six pieces, and this one represented harmony and the power of divine prayers; from this one, all present ate.

Having settled the matter, the oriṣa departed from Olodumare's presence. Aiye was charged with carrying obi back to earth where it has flourished ever since.⁸⁷



With an explicit nod toward Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, V.Y. Mudimbe calls myth a "text that can break down into pieces and reveal human experience and social order."⁸⁸ This is an instructive way of viewing Yoruba myth in general and narratives of obi, in particular, as they often bring its role in establishing and maintaining social order to the fore. The above story establishes obi's provenance as divine by citing its genesis from the prayers of the oriṣa, planted into heavenly soil by the hands of Olodumare. Obi is created from prayers for the enforcement of a divine social law that had already been established and, as I will show, it becomes a means through which those laws are enforced.

John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji cites a balance between individual and communal wellbeing as the basis of morality and ethics in African societies and the Yoruba world-sense exemplifies this orientation, with obi acting as an agent who is able to redress

⁸⁷ My telling of the story is adapted from version told by Mae Manuela of Ilê Axê Kilombo dos Palmares which appears on the website *Candomblé: O Mundo dos Orixas* (<https://ocandomble.com/2009/05/29/a-lenda-de-obi/>). I have since confirmed with a babalawo that this is a story of Ifa originating in Nigeria (rather than in Brazil) and it is believed to come from the odu Ifa Oturupon meji.

⁸⁸ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. (Indiana University Press, 1988), 142.

imbalances when they occur.⁸⁹ Of note is that the prayers from which obi is born were specifically for peace, harmony, and respect of the elders and these are communal traits which it supports by settling disputes between people and revealing the wishes of the ancestors and oriṣa. In addition, and as importantly, obi is able to discern between those individual human beings who are truthful and of good character and those who are not. A verse of the odu *ogbe* from the corpus of sixteen cowry divination notes that obi has been used to settle disputes from the beginning of time and that the that and, in speaking of how it settles these disputes, the verse opens and concludes with slightly different versions of the same refrain:

Eke ni pa obi ni i di
 Ọdale ni pa obi ni ʃi gogo
 Oninu ni pa obi ti yan ketekete

Liars are those whose obi face down
 Traitors are those whose obi become
 discolored
 Honest people are those whose obi
 show discernment⁹⁰

Yoruba morality is typically couched in terms of personal virtues such as honesty and respect, with persons who exhibit these characteristics being dubbed with appellations like *oniwa rere* (owner of good character) and *oniwa pele* (owner of gentle character).⁹¹ People who exhibit these ethical behaviors are held in high esteem as they are a crucial aspect of maintaining communal bonds and societal function while those who do not

⁸⁹ John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji, “Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture” in *A Companion to African Philosophy* by Kwasi Wiredu, Ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 396.

⁹⁰ William W. Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World*. (Indiana University Press, 1980), 126. I have amended the translation of the last line.

⁹¹ Bewaji, 399.

exhibit these characteristics are considered threats. As obi is able to help the community to differentiate between these two types of people through a divinatory process, which I will examine in detail in the next chapter, it plays a central role in identifying—and, if necessary, eliminating—societal threats and keeping the community intact.

In her discussion of identity, Linda Alcoff argues that it is “visible identities”—race and gender, which can be seen—that are the most “real” and most deeply permeate the formation of the self because they guide how we are seen by others.⁹² I assert that use of obi helps to materialize practitioners’ otherwise unseen moral identities rendering them visible and, therefore, more “real” and directly influential in community members’ perception and experience of one another. By bringing an individual’s moral character into the realm of the visual—as with his or her obi continually facing down or becoming discolored, to use the example in the above refrain—it may be directly witnessed by others and this concept of witnessing, as I will discuss, is a central feature of Ifa-Orisha ethics and epistemology.

Aside from situating obi as an exalted presence, the above narrative also, delineates the creation of each different type of obi. As each plant has its own *aṣe* and personality, each type of obi has its own *aṣe* which undergirds its function. The monocotyledonous, or unsegmented, type of obi, for example, is called *akiriboto* and is said to be used for medicinal purposes, primarily for either “opening” or “closing” of womb of a woman or affecting the reproductive power of a man. Noteworthy is that

⁹² Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self, Studies in Feminist Philosophy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

while this variety of obi is not mentioned in the story, it exemplifies the single source theory of construction and destruction in that it has the power to open a “closed” womb by remove blockages preventing procreation, and it also has the power to remove the power of creation or “close” the womb or to render a man impotent. For this reason, this unsegmented obi is kept a highly guarded and, as it is exceedingly rare, special precautions are taken to preserve it when one is found.⁹³

The second variety of obi cited in the story, *gbanja* or *goro*, has two segments and it is said have been shared by Elenini, the orisha of obstacles, and Olodumare.⁹⁴

Traditionally, this type of obi was eaten for its medicinal properties but not used for divination. The third variety contains three segments, and is fittingly called *eta* (three). Per the narrative, this obi is broken and given to the three male orisha who were present and, on earth, it is used to communicate primarily with the warrior orisha, Eṣu and Ogun. Eṣu is the divine messenger who carries prayers to Olodumare and in a similar vein, the three load obi is also used to pass messages amongst people. If one babalawo wants to see another, traditionally he could send an eta obi by way of one of his children or

⁹³ I have never personally seen one of these obi, and most of my research collaborators had not seen one either though a few claimed to have seen and used them. I was first informed of their function by Baba Ifayemi Abidemi, and this report of their function was corroborated by other priests.

⁹⁴ It is noteworthy that, as indicated above, this two-lobed variety of obi (*kola nitida*) is a separate species from the other types cited in the narrative (*kola acuminata*) and is not native to Yorubaland. This suggests that either this story came into being after the two-lobed variety was introduced or that there exist two-lobed *kola acuminata*. The former seems more likely as all scientific accounts of kola identify the two-lobed variety as *kola nitida*. Note that while the Yoruba term *obi abata* refers to all *kola acuminata* regardless the number of lobes, it is most frequently used in reference to the four-lobed variety.

assistants and that would alert the recipient that the sender urgently wishes to see him and that it is an important matter.

The fourth variety of obi, the *iya* (mother), is so-called as it is the first variety that is perfectly balanced containing both the male and female principles, with two segments being classified as *ako* (male) and two as *abo* (female) due to their physical characteristics.⁹⁵ It is this balance that renders the *iya* obi sacred and able to speak and communicate with humans on behalf of the *oriṣa* and it is therefore the type most frequently used for offering and divination. *Olufuwa* is the fifth variety of obi is called and in addition to the four lobes of the *iya* obi, it contains an additional segment called the *ofa* which must be removed before it is used for divination. In the narrative, this fifth piece is said to represent *Oriṣanla* (also *Obatala*) the *oriṣa* thought responsible for shaping the physical world at the behest of *Olodumare*. Finally, the narrative identifies the sixth variety, *iwarefa*, as representing harmony and the power of divine prayers. The practitioners with whom I spoke noted that this type of obi is most frequently used for offering, prayer, and ritual, but not for divination.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the *Ifa-Oriṣa* cosmos and the obi, both its natural and heavenly origins, though the two can scarcely be separated. The lack of ontological chasm between the natural and supernatural that *Kwasi Wiredu* identifies in reference to

⁹⁵ This will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.

Akan cosmology⁹⁶ hold true for Yoruba cosmology as well, and the obi is a fitting exemplar of existence in the both/and space. While connections between the material and immaterial as exemplified by the mind-body problem have long perplexed Western scholars of philosophy, psychology, and neurology, amongst disciplines, no such confusion exists in Yoruba religio-philosophy marked, as it is by a type of monism whereby there is one spacio-temporal totality, to use Wiredu's words,⁹⁷ in which all things exist and through which all things are connected. Obi is one instantiation of that totality, born of cosmic and earthly soils that are, in a sense, one in the same.

I pause here to note that I use the compound religio-philosophy as I agree with Joseph Omoregbe's assertion that "much African philosophical thought is preserved through the proverbs, stories and mythologies that accompany religion"⁹⁸ but feel it important to negotiate their impasses as well as their intersections. As Kimberley C. Patton notes:

Religious thought is an irreducible form of thought, which always, in the end, stands beyond the reach of any explanatory formulaic thought that does not entirely share its epistemological premises and operations... Thus while theory about religious experience based either on the methods of senses or those of the intellect may partially illumine, it will always be inadequate.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Okot P'Bitek and Kwasi Wiredu, *Decolonizing African Religion: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship*. (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011), xxiii.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Joseph Omoregbe, "African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today" in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed. *African Philosophy: An Anthology*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 5.

⁹⁹ Kimberley C. Patton, *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

This is to say that although I regard Ifa-Oriṣa practice—and those interactions with obi, specifically—as philosophically grounded in logic and reasoning it is not my aim to philosophize it out of its distinctly sacred, irreducible essence. That said, philosophical ideation is immensely helpful to our understanding of religious axioms and narratives as most all of them address some branch of philosophical thought, be it ethics, social or political philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics or logic.

Existential philosophy, per Lewis Gordon, is premised upon concerns around existence, including questions of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality and liberation and is marked by a centering of the “situation” of inquiry itself. He expounds on the meaning of “situation” noting that it is essentially the lived context in which the inquiry is taking place.¹⁰⁰ I will argue that existential concerns are a central point around which Yoruba religio-philosophy revolves and, further, that this is a primary reason why obi holds such a high position. As aforementioned, within the Ifa-Oriṣa world-sense, the primary aim is a maintenance of the balance between constructive and destructive forces of the universe or, more precisely, those constructive and destructive forces that act on human life. The most prominent of those forces is the one that strikes fear into the heart of all people at one point or another: *iku* (death).

Listening to Ifa-Oriṣa practitioners pray highlights the concern with death as well as the concrete nature of intercession. Rather than an imprecise declaration (ex. “God will bless you”) when praying for another person, for example, the simple statement “You

¹⁰⁰ Lewis Gordon, “Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility.” In *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, Lewis Gordon (ed). (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 3.

won't die" is commonly used. As well, the first blessing that a practitioner typically requests for themselves and others is *aiku* (lack of death). That obi has a unique ability to avert death is reflected in the oft-cited refrain, *obi ni biku, obi ni bi arun* (it is obi that can avert death, it is obi that can avert sickness), but this is not only in reference to physical death or sickness. Obi also helps to avert the sickness and eventual death of the community and society by helping to establish and maintain social order, which includes facilitating communication with the ancestors and the orisha. But how, precisely, does it do this?

CHAPTER 2 | AURAL AESTHETICS AND KINESTHETIC CONVERSATIONS: OBI DIVINATION AND EPISTEMOLOGY

A brass bell rings.

Ore Yeye o! Ore Yeye Oşun! Oşun, omi o, ota o, ide o, agba o! Ore Yeye o!

Thus begins my prayer-conversation with the orişa Oşun, goddess of the Oşun river and patron of the town of Oşogbo, who is most often simplistically cited as the “goddess of love” but who, very importantly, embodies civilization and connections between people as it is on the banks of her home, the river, where most all societies began. Kneeling before my home shrine, I touch my forehead to the floor in supplication to all the orişa present. As today is Oşun’s worship day, I remove the bowl holding her implements from the shrine shelf, place it on the floor, knock on the lid three times on the lid and open it.

As I continue to pray, I take one four-lobed obi from the bag on my shrine and place it into small bowl of water to bathe it, as is customary before performing divination. Removing it from the water, I touch the obi to my head, chest, and to the implements of Oşun and then place it on the floor before her. I touch the floor with the fingers of my right hand, and then slap the fist of my left hand with my open palm three times as I call to the earth:

Ile mo pe o (Earth I call out to you!)

I repeat the gesture, this time touching the implements of Oşun

Oşun mo pe o (Oşun, I call out to you!)

Following this, I pick the obi up and separate it into its four natural segments. I pick out the small bits from the middle of each segment, known as the “eyes,” reciting the

adage, “*Iku ki pa obi ko pa iṣeju*” (the death that kills the obi does not kill the eyes) as I remove them and place them on top of Oṣun’s implements. I then place the four segments side by side on the floor before the implements and sprinkle them with water as I continue to pray.

Picking up the four segments and holding two in my left hand and two in my right, I present each hand in turn to Oṣun and then beseech her, “*Oṣun, Iya mi, gba*” (Oṣun, my mother, please accept) and cast the four segments to the floor. Three segments land facing up, one down. This signature is called *iwa*, character. I snap my fingers three times and then quickly pick the pieces up again:

“Iya, is your message for me today a reminder that it is my good character that will bring my blessings?”

I cast the pieces again and they land in the same configuration. The answer is “no.”

I pick the pieces up.

“Iya do you have a message of *ire* (blessing) for me today?”

I cast. “No.”

I pick the pieces up again.

“Iya, do you have a message of *ayewo* (warning)¹⁰¹ for me today?”

¹⁰¹ While the term *ayewo* literally means “consulting divination to find answers to a problem” (*ikilo* being the word for “warning”) I have shorthanded *ayewo* as “warning” here because in the context of an obi divination session receiving a message of *ayewo* (in contrast to a message of *ire*, or blessing) typically serves as a warning of some impending circumstance. When obi delivers an *ayewo* message, she may refer the person to whom the message was delivered for further consultation with *erindinlogun* or *Ifa* to gain a deeper understanding of the issue and remedy it, but this is not always the case.

I cast. Again, the answer is “no.”

I stop and think, “What else she could want, or need, or want to say?” I suggest a few things, casting after each one, again and again she says “no.” What is it that she wants? I spend a few moments watching her, looking at her implements closely and then it hits me.

“Ah! You want me to take you out of this plastic bowl, is that it?”

I cast. Two pieces up, two down. *O yan*. Perfect, balanced, absolute “Yes!”

I’ve recently moved and, during the process, I stored Oşun’s implements in a covered Tupperware bowl for ease of transport. Clearly, she has grown weary of being so housed. I explain to her that I don’t have the beautiful vessel that I normally keep her in, but that I’ll put her in a glass bowl for the time being and then I rise to do so, carrying the plastic bowl containing her implements along with me into the kitchen. After carefully cleaning and shining all of her implements and transferring them to a lidded clear glass bowl, I return to the shrine area, place her on the floor, kneel down again, and pick up the segments of kola. Holding them in my hands, I ask:

“Iya, now that I’ve moved you, and with the offerings of honey, spirits, and palm oil I’m about to give you, do you accept? Is all well?”

I cast. The pieces fall slowly and land in the *ejire* position, two up and two down. “Yes, all is well.” I ring the brass bell once again, touch my forehead to the floor, and say “*modupe*” (I give thanks). Were it not a prohibition for me, I would have taken a bite of each of the segments of the obi to share in Oşun’s offering with her, as is customary, but since eating obi is my taboo, I place the four segments—unbitten—into the bowl with her implements. Taking a swig from a small bottle of gin, I use my mouth to spray it onto the

implements in the bowl. I pour in a few drops of honey, followed by a small dousing of palm oil, and then close the lid on the bowl, and place it on the shelf of the shrine. I touch my head to the floor once more before rising. Thus, our conversation ends.



Conversations like these take place between practitioners of Ifa-Oriṣa religion and their deities—known as oriṣa—on a daily basis, and the kola nut, or *obi*, is the conduit through which much of this communication takes place. Unlike some other faith traditions where communication with the divine may be whispered, or even simply thought to oneself with no verbal utterance, conversing with the oriṣa requires the practitioner’s whole self. Prayers must be spoken aloud, eyes must remain open to see signs, fingers must snap, hands must grasp, throw, and pour, mouths must chew, spit, and utter affirmations, ears must hear those affirmations, the ringing of bells, the shaking of *ṣekere*, knees and backs must bend, foreheads must touch the floor. All faculties must be engaged.

Despite the frequency with which these conversations occur, they are arguably the least studied aspect of oriṣa devotion. Though Ifa-Oriṣa has been studied extensively since the end of the 19th century—first by missionaries, later by priests, later still by scholars of religion and, most recently, by scholar-practitioners—obi divination and the epistemologies it embodies have been severely undertheorized. I argue that this is because unlike the oft-studied Ifa divination system, whose knowledge has often been reduced to its oral literature or orature, giving it a closer similarity with the Abrahamic “book faiths” and therefore more validity to outsiders as a cogent system, obi lacks the type of scriptocentric knowledgebase that might be likened to the Bible or the Qur’an,

instead occupying a decidedly more embodied space. Even insofar as behaviors have been studied within Ifa-Orisha, they have typically been grand behaviors around festivals or other large public events rather than what Elizabeth Pérez calls micropractices like obi divination. But these micropractices are of the utmost importance because, Pérez argues and I agree, they are the crux of African and Diasporic religions as they “develop the faculties, sentiments, and expertise indispensable for their viability and spread.”¹⁰²

Another reason for the understudy of obi may be that whereas Ifa is male-dominated and historically connected with Yoruba monarchy, the use of obi divination is more egalitarian: every initiate of any orisha, whether female or male, must use obi and, depending on one’s initiations and level of practice, she or he may ostensibly use it every day. Obi divination may, therefore, be one of those practices that is hidden in plain sight, so commonly engaged as to go unnoticed as a site of investigation.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the principle of duality which, I argue, undergirds the Yoruba religio-cultural world-sense and human interaction with obi. While duality is a universal phenomenon and not particular to the Yoruba, physical and linguistic representations of duality are especially pervasive within Yoruba culture and religio-philosophy¹⁰³ and one of the major ways this manifests is through Ifa-Orisha practitioners’ relationship with obi, most especially during the practice of divination.

¹⁰² Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions, North American Religions*. (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 11.

¹⁰³ Lawal, Babatunde, “Sustaining the Oneness in Their Twoness: Poetics of Twin Figures (*Ère Ìbeji*) Among the Yoruba.” In *Double Trouble Twice Blessed: Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures*, edited by Philip M. Peek. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011). 82.

Within this discussion, I will introduce the term *integrated duality*, which, I assert, more precisely describes the type of duality that exists within the Ifa-Orisha milieu than do previous conceptions.

Following this discussion, the chapter will describe and analyze the process of obi divination with special attention to the intersection between the spoken, heard, and embodied ways of knowing enacted therein. I refer to this intersection as the *Visual-Oral-Aural- Kinesthetic*—or VOAK—complex, and I refer to cultures and religions with this orientation, of which Ifa-Orisha is one, as being *VOAK-oriented*. One of my primary concerns in theorizing the VOAK complex is addressing the tendency of scholars to refer to Ifa-Orisha religion, and the Yoruba culture from within which it arises, as “oral” and to assert that cultural and religious knowledge, like obi divination, has been passed “orally” from generation to generation.¹⁰⁴ Positioning Ifa-Orisha and other African religions in this way, omits three vital epistemological components: the aural, the kinesthetic, and the visual all of which, I argue, are crucial to understanding the physical epistemology that characterizes Ifa-Orisha and other African and Diasporic religions.

¹⁰⁴ See Ruth H. Finnegan, *The Oral and beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (James Currey/ University of Chicago Press, 2007) for a concise history and critique of the concept of orality in the study of Africa.

Key Signs and Obi's Integrated Duality

Charles Long asserts that the religious impulse is driven by humans' attempt to orient themselves in the universe and to come to terms with the "ultimate significance" of their place therein.¹⁰⁵ In this quest toward placing self in conversation with the cosmos, Long and Robert Preucel¹⁰⁶ both argue that humans are continually engaged in the creation and interpretation of signs—physical and linguistic cues that refer beyond themselves—as they interpret reality. These cues may take the form of coded language (including myths, song lyrics, proverbs), objects (including "art" or material culture), and behavior (including ritual). G. R. Peterson contends that it is the latter type of encoding—particularly as expressed through socially normative action and decision-making—that is the major concern of religion, arguing that the former two have been injuriously overemphasized in the study of religion as, he asserts, religion cannot be fully understood without adequate attention to the latter.¹⁰⁷ He goes on to say that the link to behavior is crucial because not all ideologies, worldviews, or world-senses can be categorized as "religious"—they only cross into the realm of religion when they acquire normative value¹⁰⁸ and inspire moral action or ritual action of some sort.¹⁰⁹ Each community creates signs commensurate with

¹⁰⁵ C. H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 7.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Preucel, *Archaeological Semiotics* (London: Blackwell, 2006).

¹⁰⁷ G. R. Peterson, "Religion as Orienting Worldview." *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, 36, 1, (2001) 6.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

their own interpretations of this transcendent reality, even as they represent the mundane and Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of the sign identifies three main types: icon, index and symbol.¹¹⁰ While the two simpler forms of sign—the icon and the index—are much more commonly employed than the most complex form—the symbol—they are less commonly studied.¹¹¹ This seeming lack of attention to former two classes may result from the fact that the word “symbol” is often used even when reference is being made to an icon or index. As all three of these sign classes influence one another, it is imperative to understand each of them to gain a full picture of how particular signs are being employed and how, therefore, to interpret them.

In her classic article “On Key Symbols,” Sherry Ortner outlines the concept of what she calls “key symbols” and how they function within given societies. She begins by asserting that each society has central elements that are crucial to its distinctive organization and group identity;¹¹² these she identifies as key symbols. She then expounds two main functions of these symbols, stating that they can serve either to summarize or to elaborate cultures: the summarizing variety, she says, represent conglomerates of ideas and

¹¹⁰ Charles S. Peirce, “The Regenerated Logic.” *The Monist*, Vol. 7, No. 1:19-40, 1896. Peirce elaborates his concept of the sign in this piece and in many of his other writings. Robert Preucel also elaborates on Peirce's ideas in his *Archaeological Semiotics*, cited above. To briefly outline the 3 sign classes: an icon represents an object mimetically, exhibiting the same physical characteristics (i.e., the picture of a woman on a woman's bathroom is an icon); an index “points to” an object that is spatially related (i.e., a shadow is an index of sunshine); and a symbol is a complex index that refers to something – or a combination of things – which are not spatially related and, thus, the reference is understood through convention.

¹¹¹ Ian Hodder, *The Archaeology of Contextual Meanings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

¹¹² Sherry B. Ortner “On Key Symbols.” *American Anthropologist*. 75:1338-46, (1973),1338.

“stand for” the culture and its thought system as a whole¹¹³ while the elaborating variety provide members of a culture with “orientations” and “strategies” with which to move through the world.¹¹⁴ Key symbols, according to Ortner, both condense and expand these relationships as they summarize and elaborate and addressing key *signs*—not only symbols, but also icon and indices—productively broadens this conversation.

All communities have “regular and repeatable patterns of meaning” that shape their identity.¹¹⁵ For the Yoruba, duality is the most pervasive pattern and, as such, I posit duality—specifically what I call *integrated duality*—as a key sign in Yoruba religio-culture. Integrated duality stands in contrast to the concepts of binary opposition and binary complementarity posited by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Sophie Bòşède Oluwole, respectively. I align myself with aspects of the structuralist program as elucidated by Lévi-Strauss in that I accept the power and possibility of gleaning the unspoken meanings and rules behind cultural and religious acts and agree that studying relationships—whether actual or fictive—mythology, and linguistic expression is an effective means through which to identify these tacit cultural significations.¹¹⁶ I submit, however, that in the case of Ifa-Oriṣa it is integrated dualities, rather than binary oppositions, that underpin the system; it is these that we should seek to identify and analyze in order to

¹¹³ Ibid, 1340.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 1339.

¹¹⁵ Preucel, 8.

¹¹⁶ While Oluwole comes closer to my idea of integration by using the term “complementarity” rather than “opposition,” her description of how these binaries function is still much more similar to Levi-Strauss’ conception than my own.

best understand the ways in which they undergird the system. The main point of departure between integrated duality and the concept of binary opposition or complementarity is that while the latter posits sets such as light and dark, cooked and raw, male and female, and nature and culture as opposites in sharp contrast to—and, therefore possibly in conflict with—one another, integrated duality sees them as fully constitutive of one another or as “aspects of a single condition.”¹¹⁷ I argue that understanding the continuum on which these dualistic concepts exist and positing the dualities as *integrated* rather than *opposite*—which implies a this-or-that rather than the both-and orientation characteristic of Ifa-Oriṣa and Yoruba culture writ large—productively changes our view of their relationship and positively contributes to the construction of an indigenous hermeneutic.

Integrated duality rests, in large part, on the symbolic importance of what Babatunde Lawal refers to as *twoness*. As previously noted, Yoruba cosmology posits the universe as being spherical and split in two horizontally and vertically. Existing within the divided cosmos, humans are also considered divided in various ways: they are split into the body (*ara*) and the spirit (*emi*), they are considered split into their earthly manifestations (*eniyan*) and a spiritual manifestation of themselves (*enikeji*),¹¹⁸ as well as being divided into male (*ako*) and female (*abo*). Given concepts of the divided human and cosmos which stand at the center of Yoruba religio-cultural understandings,

¹¹⁷ Diamond, Stanley, *In Search of the Primitive* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1974), 6.

¹¹⁸ Lawal, 84.

balancing these various dualities—keeping the energies of the earthly realm and the extra-earthly realm, as well as the various parts of the self in equilibrium, or well-integrated—is the aim of a successful life. As such, the idea of integrated duality can be seen as a summarizing key sign that “stands for”¹¹⁹ the entire system of Yoruba thought. It can, as well, be seen as an elaborating key sign which implies “mechanisms of successful social action”¹²⁰ as it is believed that operating within integrated dyads is the most auspicious for moving through the physical world as well as for making connections with the other-than-human world.¹²¹ The centrality of integrated dyads is manifest in the doubled and coupled nature of many Yoruba religio-cultural practices. There is, for instance, premium importance placed on coupling by way of marriage and camaraderie, even amongst other-than-human entities, twin children are held in deity-like esteem,¹²² and this duality is also heavily expressed within Yoruba divination systems.

While all Yoruba divination practices exemplify the principle of integrated duality, *obi* embodies the concept as it is always split into at least two pieces, yet it

¹¹⁹ Ortner, p. 1380.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Lawal, 83. I use the phrase “other-than-human” taking a cue from Frédérique Apffel-Marglin who prefers this more neutral term to “supernatural.” See *Subversive Spiritualities: How Rituals Enact the World*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹²² In some areas of Yorubaland, twins were considered negative omens, as one of them was thought to have come from the spirit world; they were therefore killed at birth. It is unclear how widespread this practice was and when it began and ended. Some place the end of the practice and the subsequent adoration of twins in the 14th to 15th centuries, though it is said to have continued into the 19th century in some areas (Lawal 2003:87-89). Still, this conforms to the idea that doubled children were connected with the other-than-human world and important enough to warrant special attention—be it negative or positive attention.

remains a unified whole. Even when split to facilitate the divination process, the pieces do not become “opposites in conflict” but remain integrated and act in unison to present a single message. Obi is generally offered in twos and, because of its nature as both a material item and a divine being, it has the capacity to communicate with the ancestors and orisha as well as to nourish them with the aṣẹ of its own body. As the most frequently employed divination medium within Ifa-Orisha practice, obi helps to govern day-to-day existence¹²³ and to ensure that the most immediate needs of both the divinities and practitioners are met. Aside from its physical embodiment and its nature as both an object and an autonomous entity, when channeling the declarations of the orisha, the obi’s very voice is duality: it speaks in ups and downs, lights and darks, *ire* (blessings) and *ibi* (losses), acceptance and rejection. It is these complementary dyads that enable the obi to communicate in such a way that humans may understand and interpret the messages of the ancestors and orisha.

¹²³ John Mason, *Four New World Yoruba Rituals*, 2nd ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1985), 80.



Figure 7: Whole unopened iya obi, top view (photograph by author)



Figure 8: Opened four-lobed obi showing two *abo* (female, second from left and far right) and two *ako* (male, far left and second from right) cotyledons (lobes) with “eyes” removed (Photograph by author)



Figure 9: *Ofa* (fifth lobe) showing the double-Y terminus (Photograph by author)

One of the most crucial dualities that the obi embodies is the balance between male and female energies, *ako* and *abo*, respectively. The integrated dyad of male and female is the most crucial of all, as—cloning and other actions of modern science notwithstanding—the continuance of life, especially human life, depends on their continued interaction. While, as aforementioned, there are several types of obi, the ones most often used for offering and divination are those which contain four or five lobes because they contain an equal balance of male and female energy.¹²⁴ In the same way that

¹²⁴ There is continuing debate about whether it is permissible to use *obi gbanja* (two lobed obi) in the process of divination because its constituent parts do not display any distinguishing “sex characteristics.” While obi abata is definitely preferred, my research indicates that practitioners—particularly in the

humans must be complementarily coupled in order to create life, so too must the lobes of obi be thus coupled in order to make the most effective use of its power. The four-lobed obi abata, known as *iya* (mother) *obi* (Figure 7) bears the mark of the crossroads, or the divisions of the universe, when viewed from above and when opened, separates into four pieces consisting of two male segments and two female; the male is marked by a single edge down the center of the lobe whereas the female boasts an edge that splits into two forming a “Y” shape at its terminus (Figure 8). Five-lobed obi, known as *olufuwa*, also contains two male and two female segments, but contains an extra segment known as the *ofa* (Figure 9). The *ofa* is considered a “double female” because it has two “Y” shapes at the terminus of its central edge and, as its presence disrupts the gender balance of the cotyledons, the diviner removes it before casting the obi, using only the two male and two female segments. In a similar vein, *eta obi* (three-lobed obi) typically contains two single-edged male segments and one Y-edged female segment and is, thus, skewed toward the masculine side of the gender spectrum. It is not, therefore, used for general divination, though it is a favored food of the orisha Eṣu, who is male and to whom the number three is sacred. *Eta obi* may be used to communicate with Eṣu though, even for him, it is more common to use to the four- or five-lobed obi from which it is possible to gain more nuanced information because of the larger number of divination signatures that it is possible to obtain.

diaspora—do use gbanja due to the difficulty in procuring abata. Whereas obi gbanja grows throughout west Africa and is therefore imported by various groups, including Ghanaians and Senegalese, obi abata only grows in Nigeria so is scarcer and also typically more expensive at approximately US\$35-40/pound as compared with about US\$15/pound for gbanja (prices in New York City as of February 2017).

As illustrated in the above vignette, when preparing to divine with obi, the practitioner places the obi into water to bathe it and begin the process of activation. Activation is a key concept within African spiritual practices and is a means through which ordinary items become what Mircea Eliade famously called *hierophanies*, or manifestations of the sacred, having been rendered “precious” either through something innate in their form or through a process enacted upon them.¹²⁵ Per Yoruba religio-philosophy, all things are potential hierophanies as all contain *aṣẹ*; activation is a means through which to call the *aṣẹ* forth into a more dynamic state. Abiodun notes that the effective use of *aṣẹ* requires verbalization, visualization, and/or performance of the attributive characteristics of a thing or being whose power is being harnessed¹²⁶ and obi is giving consistent verbal reminders which of its attributes the practitioner is tapping.

Concurrent with the bathing, extemporaneous prayer and recitation or singing of the obi’s attributes are a part of the activation process, with practitioners commonly reminding the obi of her special status as an intermediary between humans and the *ajogun*, or destructive forces, by reciting the refrain *obi ni biku, obi ni bi arun* (it is obi that begs death, it is obi that begs disease) referencing the obi’s ability to save the practitioner from death. It is important to note the dual nature of this reference, as it refers to both physical and social death, which are integrated. Since obi acts as a moral agent,

¹²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, first English edition 1954), 4.

¹²⁶ Abiodun, 310.

she is able to help avert the social death of an individual who has committed a moral infraction which, in turn, supports his or her physical life. The odu Ifa oturupon ofun speaks to obi's role in this matter:

<i>Oturupon bisi bisi</i>	Oturupon multiplies
<i>A difa fun eleri bisi bisi</i>	Ifa divination was performed for the immoral person (whose deeds have) multiplied
<i>Ti o maa fi obi bee iku</i>	Who uses obi to beg death
<i>Kini alade fi obi se</i>	What does he use obi for?
<i>Ipe</i>	Calling out ¹²⁷
<i>Kini alade fi obi se</i>	What does he use obi for?
<i>Oyin</i>	Sweetening (lit. honey)

As integration, duality and coexistence are at the center of the Ifa-Oriṣa world-sense, to lose one's social access is, in effect, to die and so truth and reconciliation—or reintegration—after an infraction becomes paramount. Again, the two-step process comes to the fore as it is not enough to beg for forgiveness alone, one must also seek to sweeten, or make things right. Obi is both the offering for doing so and also the agent who will report to the success (or lack thereof) of the reintegration to the community.

After bathing the obi and vocalizing prayers, the practitioner touches the obi to his or her own head¹²⁸ and to the implements of the oriṣa with whom they are preparing to communicate in order to bring the two into concert with each other and create a

¹²⁷ Calling out for mercy or begging death to go away.

¹²⁸ This is assuming that the practitioner is communicating with the oriṣa on her/his own behalf. If communicating on behalf of another, which is common, the obi would be touched to that individual's head. Also of note, this type of communication also takes place using icons representing the ancestors, but for ease I will refer primarily to oriṣa during this discussion. As well, it is of note that some of these processes take place concurrently. For example, a practitioner may continue to pray, sing, and recite incantations throughout the entire process of bathing, splitting, and throwing the obi.

“temporary bundling”¹²⁹ of the *aṣẹ* of the *oriṣa*, the practitioner, and the *obi* who will act as a mediator between the two. As this bundling takes place, the practitioner may sing:

<i>Iṣe a robi</i>	Obi fulfills its mission [of passing messages]
<i>Obi je (i)re</i>	Obi brings goodness
<i>Oko iku lọ</i>	Death will go
<i>Oko arun lọ</i>	Disease will go
<i>Ire gbogbo ko wole wa</i>	All the blessings of life will come in
<i>Iṣe a robi</i>	Obi fulfills its mission [of passing messages]
<i>Obi je (i)re</i>	Obi brings goodness ¹³⁰

This song serves to remind the *obi* of its mission and to further activate the *aṣẹ* that renders it a capable and effective intermediary between human beings and other-than-humans.

Once the *obi* is bathed and the prayers rendered, the practitioner places the *obi* on the ground before the icons of the *oriṣa*. As the earth—on which the *obi* will land when thrown—will also bear witness to whatever messages are revealed, the practitioner greets the earth and calls her *aṣẹ* into the mix by touching the ground with the fingers of the right hand, and then slapping the fist of the left hand with an open palm such that the impact is percussive while calling out *Ile mo pe o* (Earth I call out to you) three times. The gesture is then repeated, this time touching the icons of the *oriṣa* or ancestral spirit and calling *Oriṣa mo pe o* (*Oriṣa*, I call out to you).¹³¹ Following this, the practitioner

¹²⁹ I am grateful to Kyrah M. Daniels and her work on sacred bundles in Haiti and Democratic Republic of Congo for this turn of phrase.

¹³⁰ I received this song from Baba Ifayemi Abidemi Fakayode in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, February 26, 2015. Translation mine.

¹³¹ An *oriṣa* or ancestor’s name would replace the word *oriṣa* here so, for instance, “Ogun mo pe o” if consulting Ogun or “Baba mi mo pe o” if consulting the spirit of one’s father. As well, it is important to

uses her or his hands to open the obi. Traditionally, using any instrument to open the obi is frowned upon, lest it be damaged—damaged obi are considered unfit for use—and also because the energy of the instrument may disrupt the *aṣẹ*,¹³² though I have observed practitioners use the edge of their prayer bells to pry open particularly stubborn nuts.¹³³ Assuming it is *iya obi* being used, the practitioner will now have two male and two female lobes. Aside from their gender characteristics, each lobe of the obi has an “eye” (*oju*), or a small protrusion that extends from its central seam.¹³⁴ While these eyes are thought to assist the obi’s spiritual vision, the diviner—somewhat counterintuitively—removes them before casting and remarks *iku kii pa obi ko pa iṣeju* (death may kill the obi but it will not kill the eyes) while picking the eyes from the lobe, generally using the nail of the thumb. It is common to verbally ward off the *ajogun* (destructive forces)—which include *iku* (death), *arun* (disease), and *ofò* (loss), among others—while picking out the eyes, which are then offered to the *oriṣa* before the obi is thrown.¹³⁵

note that individual style may change the order of some of this sequence. For example, some practitioners would complete this series of gestures after opening the obi.

¹³² Using metal objects, for example, is said to being Ogun’s energy into the mix which may change the outcome of the reading, I am grateful to Chief Yagbe Onilu for this reflection.

¹³³ I have done this in my own practice. It is more common when the obi is very fresh and hasn’t “loosened” yet. As can be seen in figure 7 above, when the seed begins to sprout, a small stalk emerges from the center which begins to split the seed and renders it easier to open.

¹³⁴ In figures 8 and 9 above, a small depression is visible in each cotyledon where the eye has been removed.

¹³⁵ A story of Ifa says that the reason for this is that, as with many other stories, the eyes offered sacrifice while the kola herself did not when coming from *isalorun* so the eyes are not killed with the obi, though, in being separated from her they die as well.

Once the eyes have been removed from each lobe, the practitioner places them on the floor before the icons of the orisha (Figure 8) and then sprinkles water over the inner surface that remained untouched by the initial bathing. She then picks up and holds two of the lobes in her right hand and two in the left, presenting each hand to the orisha in turn saying, “*osi ni, otun ni*” (this is the left, this is the right) indicating that the diviner is using both hands with which to communicate, denoting presenting the obi to the spirit in honesty. The four lobes are then tossed to the ground¹³⁶ using both hands, and the diviner notes the way in which they land to assess the message from the spirit. These messages and their interpretations are the crux of obi’s importance and delivering them is the most important function most obi will perform in their short lives. We will examine these messages in the next section.

Obi Speaks in Twos: Learning the Language

J.D.Y. Peel posits the Yoruba as a people “especially devoted to divination as a category of religious action” even as compared with other African groups¹³⁷ and, indeed, divination plays a significant role in the lives of Ifa-Orisha practitioners. Since, as Ysamur Flores-Peña mentions, “there is no possibility of eliminating the contradictions of our

¹³⁶ While in his study of obi, Afolabi Epega suggests that obi divination should be done on an opan Ifa, I have most often seen it performed on the ground or, much less frequently, on a plate. Epega notes that when the obi fall they create the patterns of the odu Ifa which is true in that both rely on a binary system, however, in everyday use, people typically rely on the obi for its own unique messages, discussed below, and not for the revelation of odu Ifa.

¹³⁷J. Peel, “The Pastor and the ‘Babalawo’: The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol. 60, No. 3 (1990), 341.

dual universe”¹³⁸ and that one cannot completely avoid the destructive end of the spectrum of universal energy, devotees consistently perform rituals of propitiation and atonement to negotiate the cosmos in an attempt to keep the aṣẹ working on the constructive side of the continuum. Divination is the means through which they determine which rituals need to be performed or offerings made and, once completed, to ascertain if they have been accepted or if further work is needed.

Yoruba Divination Forms		
System	Medium	Number of Possible Signatures
Obi ¹³⁹	Obi (kola nut)	9
Erindinlogun	16 Cowry shells (sci: <i>cypraea annulus</i>)	17
Ifa	16 Ikin Ifa (consecrated palm nuts) 4 Opeḷẹ seeds, halved	256

There are three primary forms of Yoruba divination: obi, erindinlogun, and Ifa. Obi is generally theorized as the oldest of the Yoruba divination forms, followed by Ifa (performed using palm nuts or opeḷẹ seeds), and then erindinlogun (performed using cowry shells) for a number of reasons, both historic and mythological.¹⁴⁰ Considering the

¹³⁸ Ysamur Flores-Peña, “‘Son Dos los Jimagüas’ (‘The Twins Are Two’): Worship of the Sacred Twins in Lucumí Religious Culture.” In *Double Trouble Twice Blessed: Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures*, ed. Philip M. Peek. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 109.

¹³⁹ Obi in this table refers only to the 4-lobed *iya obi*. When using *gbanja* (2-lobed) there are three possible signatures and *eta obi* (3-lobed) has four possible signatures. Though there are nine possible signatures when using *iya obi*, popular usage has retracted this to five. Further discussion on this below.

¹⁴⁰ John Mason, *Four New World Yoruba Rituals*, 2nd ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1985) has theorized that obi came first, followed by the other forms as have Ocha’ni Lele, Baba Osundiya, and other practitioners who have written about obi divination in the diaspora.

historic factors, the kola nut is native to Yorubaland and requires no special preparation for use. Though the palm nuts (*ikin*) and seeds (*opẹlẹ*) used for Ifa divination are also native to the area, they require intensive ritual preparation, in the case of *ikin*, or crafting, in the case of *opẹlẹ*, before they can be used for divination. In contrast to these, Ogundiran notes that billions of cowry shells (sci: *cypraea annulus*), which are not native to Yorubaland, were introduced into the area beginning in the early 17th century, having been used primarily for payment for human cargo during the transatlantic trade.¹⁴¹ He goes on to say that aside from their monetary value, cowries acquired a symbolic power as cultural capital and become ensconced in the tales of the orisha, eventually being introduced as a divination medium. Despite its being the oldest and most commonly employed, obi has received relatively little scholarly attention while much has been written on the latter two with Ifa having received the most scholarly attention, by far.

While there are nine signatures in total which may be derived from one casting or “throw” of an iya obi, there are five basic positions (See table below) that are most commonly used to interpret the message of the obi: *alaafia* (peace), *isegun* (victory), *iwa* (character), *okan* (heart / one), and *ejire* (two blessings). Each signature is determined by how many lobes of obi are open (face up) or closed (face down) or, to use another dyad, how many are showing their “light” side—the inside of the lobe from which the eye has been removed—or “dark” side.

¹⁴¹ Akinwumi Ogundiran and Paula Saunders, *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic*. (Indiana University Press, 2014), 68.

Obi Signatures		
Name	Meaning	Position
Alaafia	Peace	All pieces of obi facing upward (○○○○)
Işegun	Victory	All pieces of obi facing downward (●●●●)
Iwa	Character	Three pieces of obi facing upward, one facing downward (○○○●)
Okan	Heart / One	Three pieces of obi facing downward, one facing upward (●●●○)
Ejire / Yan	Two blessings / Acceptance	Two pieces of obi facing upward, two facing downward (○○●●)

The most auspicious of these signatures, ejire, exemplifies the importance of integration, as it is marked by two open lobes and two closed, representing complete balance of *aşé*: the light and dark, creative and destructive. Moreover, this sign is considered even more perfectly balanced if the two open segments are one male and one female rather than two lobes of the same sex, indicating that the equilibrium should be complete and represented in every way. When ejire falls, practitioners say that the “obi yan,” meaning that the *orişa* for whom the obi is speaking has unequivocally accepted whatever proposition was stated immediately before its casting and no further casting is required. When one’s obi yan, it speaks not only of the inquiry but also of the inquirer as we are reminded by the aforementioned adage that *oninu ni pa obi ti yan ketekete* (it is those who are honest whose obi yan).

Of note as well is the fact that this signature is known as “the twins,” alluding to the high regard in which *ibeji* (twins), who have been theorized as embodiments of the dualism inherent in Yoruba religio-culture,¹⁴² are held. *Ibeji* are thought to result from a

¹⁴² Cf. Lawal, Farris-Thompson, and Flores-Peña, Ysamur. (2011). “‘Son Dos los Jimaguas’ (‘The Twins Are Two’): Worship of the Sacred Twins in Lucumí Religious Culture.” In *Double Trouble Twice Blessed: Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures*, ed. Philip M. Peek. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

bond between an individual and his or her spirit double (*enikeji*) that was so strong, neither could leave the other behind.¹⁴³ Much like the obi that is both spirit and object, twins are conceived of as being not fully spirit and not fully human—or, both spirit and human—as one is thought the *enikeji* (spirit-self) of the other, and it is never clear which is which. In a similar vein, twins of mixed gender—one male and one female—are considered the most balanced as it is with the ejire obi signature.

When all four lobes of obi show their light side, the signature is called alaafia which speaks to health, peace and general well-being. Though the presence of an abundance of light or creative potential may seem desirable, this sign is imbalanced and not to be fully trusted, a second throw is therefore required to determine whether any further action will be needed to usher in the alaafia indicated. If the second throw is ejire, then nothing further is required, however, if any other signature appears on the second throw, the practitioner enters into a series of inquiries to find out which precise ritual action should be taken or offering made. In a similar vein, when all four lobes of the obi are showing their dark side, this is known as iṣegun, indicating victory over hardship. It is common for the practitioner to physically enact the triumph by breaking the obi with a rock when this signature appears and to continue the inquiry with a second obi, although he or she may not do so if there is not a second obi available. As with the alaafia signature, the practitioner asks whether there is any requirement to make the victory

¹⁴³ Lawal, 85.

come to fruition and throws a second time, or as many times as needed for the obi to reveal the appropriate action.

The signature iwa, or character, consists of three open lobes and one closed indicating that while there is mostly light present, there is a tinge of darkness. In her work on Dogon divination, Laura Grillo notes that the practice “invites reflection on personal actions and their consequences and... places those actions within the dynamic patterns of the cosmos.”¹⁴⁴ Obi divination, and Yoruba divination more broadly, invites the same reflection and orientation, and iwa embodies this by encouraging the caster to examine his or her character. As previously noted character is at the pinnacle of Yoruba morality and when the iwa signature is revealed the caster is often being alerted that there is something about their own behavior in needs modification. Okan, the final signature, offers a similar invitation for reflection as the caster’s worries are being highlighted when this sign appears. “*Şe mo le fokan mi bale?*” (“Should I not worry?”; lit. “Can I put my heart down?”) is the question associated with this signature and, in asking it, the practitioner is encouraged to identify a situation that is worrying him or her. If the second throw reveals ejire, the orisha, by way of obi is confirming that they will handle the situation at hand and that the caster should let their heart be light. If any other signature is revealed, the inquiry must continue into what remedy might be needed such that the situation will be resolved and cause no further consternation on the part of the caster.

¹⁴⁴Laura Grillo, “Dogon Divination as an Ethic of Nature,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 311.

With this basic understanding of the language of obi and the typical process (Figure 10), it is clear to see the call-and-response rhythm of obi divination. Rather than a single casting that results in a single sign for interpretation by way of an intermediary, as is more typical of erindinlogun or Ifa, using obi is more intimate, as practitioners are most usually consulting on their own behalf and entering into a conversation with their oriṣa that invites their own reflection and interjection. In listening to Ifa-Oriṣa devotees speak of this process, many refer to it in the way they would an exchange with a friend: “Ogun told me not to go out yesterday, so I stayed in” or “Yemoja reminded me about that ebo I owe her.” Abiḍun cites a Yoruba proverb regarding the importance of being able to enter into these conversations which states: *Èbọra to luti la nbọ*, (“We worship only deities that can respond when consulted”).¹⁴⁵ Like the cooking and talking that Elizabeth Perez highlights in her recent ethnography, consulting with oriṣa by way of obi is a means through which practitioners are socialized into Ifa-Oriṣa religion and through which they first participate in the community of humans and spirits.

¹⁴⁵ Rowland Abiodun, “Aṣẹ: Verbalizing and Visualizing Creative Power through Art.” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 24, Fasc. 4 (Nov., 1994), 310.

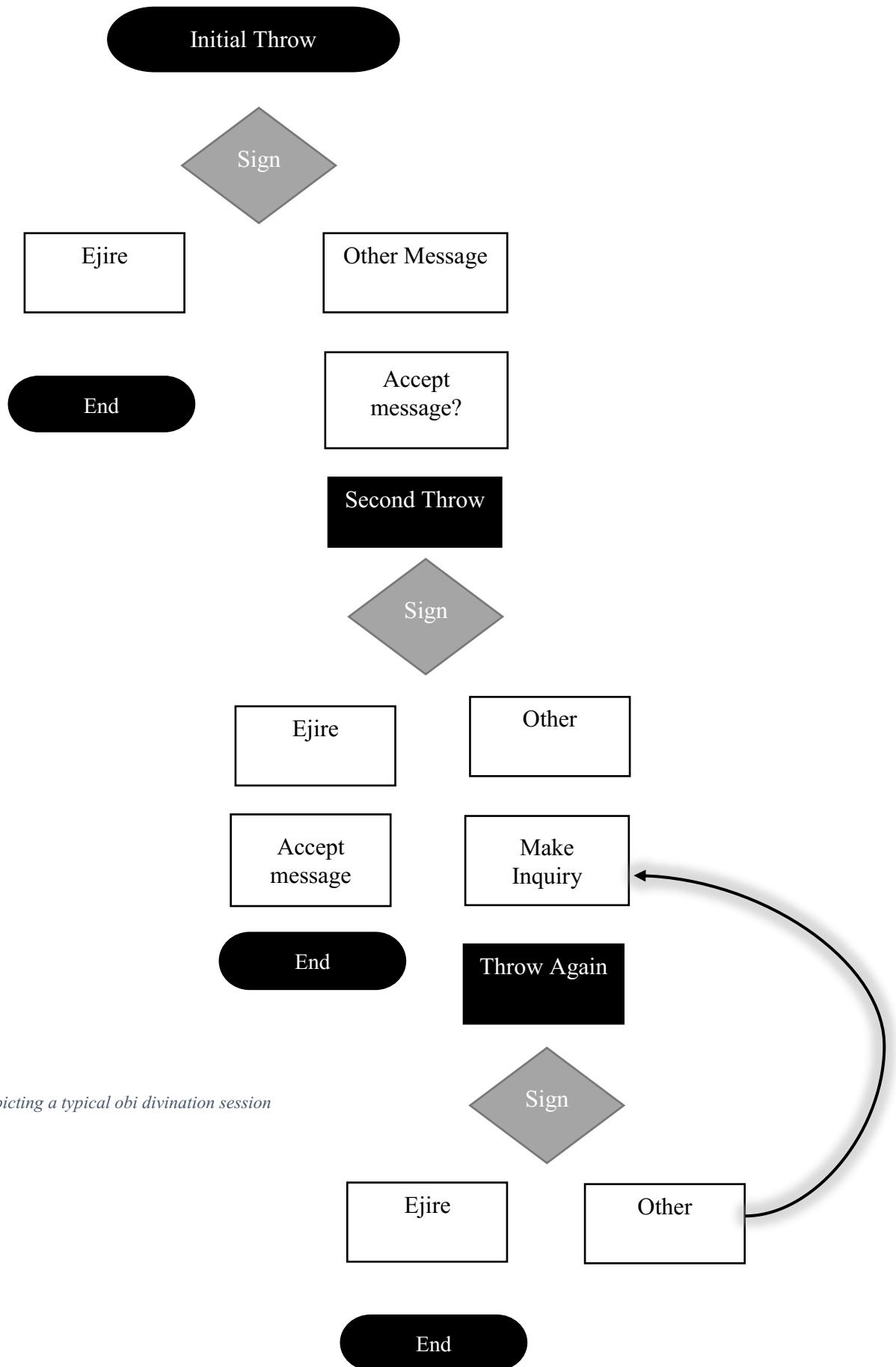


Figure 10: Decision tree depicting a typical obi divination session

Obi and the Visual-Oral-Aural-Kinesthetic (VOAK) Complex

The energy is palpable as the growing crowd stands under the night sky. It is clear and black with the light of the stars shining as if through pin holes. Shouting in English-speckled Yoruba comes at me from all sides and I am lightly resisting the forward surge of the crowd behind me lest I be pushed from the small ledge I am standing on and, thus, a bit too close to the ritual stage.

I watch as one of the *babaloşa* (orişa priests) present produces two obi from his pocket and places them on the ground before Ogun's shrine: an assemblage of metal partially concealed by a skirt of palm fronds. Also before the shrine sit plates of roasted yam and roasted black-eyed peas which will be offered to Ogun along with the sacrificial animals whose blood will soon coat the metal implements.

“Omi! Mu omi wa!” (Water! Bring water!) the babalawo shouts over the loud murmur of the excited crowd.

A seemingly disembodied hand breaks through the crowd holding a blue plastic container half-filled with water which the babalawo quickly snatches and into which he places the obi. He then reaches in, picks them out of the water, and proceeds to move round the crowd, touching them to the forehead of each person present, including myself. Just as the babalawo raises the obi to touch his own head, which should be reserved for last, two women run up shouting “Emi! Emi!” (Me! Me!) prompting him to touch their heads—and the heads of the babies on their backs, which they turn to present to him—before touching his own.

The obi rest in the babalawo's energetically gesticulating hand as he metes out a fervent prayer which is peppered with responses of “Aşe!” from the crowd. Following his

final intercessory declaration, the babalawo separates the four lobes of the obi, removes their eyes, and places them face up on the ground. He sprinkles them with water and beseeches them to report Ogun's preemptive acceptance of the *ebo* (sacrificial items) being offered to him. Moving swiftly and fluidly, the babalawo picks two lobes of the obi up with his right hand, the other two lobes with the left, claps the two together and does a slight flip of one hand over the other releasing the obi which fall to the ground. There is a very brief but pregnant moment of silence as the babalawo and we, the crowd, peer downward to see what the obi has said.

“Obi yan!” (Obi has accepted!) the babalawo shouts in excited confirmation of what those of us at the front of the crowd have already seen: two of the obi’s four lobes landed face up, two landed face down, perfect balance, Ogun’s unconditional acceptance of our offerings. The crowd roars with exclamations of "Ogun ye!" (Hail Ogun!) and all turn their backs to the shrine and wag their behinds at Ogun’s implements, the customary greeting for Ogun. Young boys begin to beat bells and the crowd begins to sing Ogun’s praise as the *babaloşa* sharpens his machete against the. The sacrifice may commence.



The “oral” nature of African Religions is generally taken for granted and much has been written about the phenomenon of orality within African cultures, with the term “oral literature” or “orature” most frequently being employed when referring to African repositories of knowledge. Akintunde Akinyemni notes that some of these repositories have been saved from the brink of extinction by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity which spurred various initiatives aimed at their

documentation and preservation.¹⁴⁶ The Ifa divination system, with its attendant body of knowledge and practices, were deemed one of these pieces of intangible heritage, further increasing its prominence as compared with the other two forms of Yoruba divination.

Aside from the authority conferred on Ifa both by both its historical association with the Yoruba monarchy and, later, by its addition to the world lexicon of intangible heritage, I argue that another important factor in its emphasis is that it is most commonly referenced in relation to its body of knowledge, known as *odu Ifa*¹⁴⁷ giving it more congruence with so-called “book faiths” like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. This ease of articulation with a literary tradition that has been established as the pinnacle of knowledge in western epistemology as well as the consistent reference to the *odu Ifa* as “poetry”¹⁴⁸ has further cemented Ifa’s scholarly authority.

Obi, on the other hand, has no such associated orature, instead occupying a decidedly more embodied and extemporaneous space. While there is a general order of operations that practitioners follow when casting obi, as noted above, the exchange is typically more intimate and conversational than it is when employing other forms of divination. As with many facets of Yoruba religio-culture, working with obi involves all

¹⁴⁶ Akintunde Akinyemi, *Orature and Yorùbá Riddles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

¹⁴⁷ As with many Yoruba words, *odu* is both singular and plural, so *odu Ifa* references the entirety of the corpus, whereas *an odu Ifa* references one specific section of the corpus.

¹⁴⁸ Wande Abimbola’s works *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa* (1975), *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (1976), and *Ifa Divination Poetry* (1977), the first of which was published by UNESCO, contributed heavily to the casting of Ifa in this literary light.

of the senses and, in particular the use of speaking and hearing in call-and-response, as well as the use of various meaning-laden bodily motions. Because all of these modes work in tandem, I argue that it is not sufficient to speak of the “orality” of Yoruba religio-culture, but to speak in terms of the oral, the aural, the kinesthetic, and the visual as a unit working in tandem. I refer to this as the Visual-Oral-Aural-Kinesthetic complex and to cultures which rely heavily on this combination of orientations as being VOAK-oriented.

The major premise of speaking of VOAK-orientation is this: that which is rendered orally is intended to be received aurally, and because this process of recitation and reception is typically accompanied by movements of the body—also pregnant with meaning—which are intended to be received visually. As such, it is clear that speaking of the oral alone does not suffice; these four modes work in tandem and must be studied as a unit in order to gain the fullest understanding not only of any given utterance but also of Ifa-Oriṣa epistemology as a whole.

In addition to replacing the term “oral” when describing African religions and cultures, the concept of VOAK-orientation is also intended to augment the notion of performance in Ifa-Oriṣa religion as most recently advanced by K. Noel Amherd in his 2010 monograph, *Reciting Ifa*.¹⁴⁹ Although Amherd’s focus is the recitation of Ifa divination orature, his broader idea about the non-normative nature of ritual performance may be extended to encompass other aspects of Ifa-Oriṣa practice. The case could be made, in fact, that the idea of heterogenous performance that does not exactly mimic

¹⁴⁹ K. Noel Amherd, *Reciting Ifa: Difference, Heterogeneity, and Identity* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2010). See also: Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency, African Systems of Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

previous performances—even by the same practitioner—is even more evident with obi divination than with Ifa because the latter has at least an expectation of formulaicness whereas the former is expected to be conversational and extemporaneous. Of course, even casual conversations follow a type of formula—greeting, question-asking, leave-taking—but if they feel rigid or rehearsed, they lose the sense of authenticity and connection. The same holds true for conversations with the divine.

This particularly significant because understanding this aspect of Ifa-Oriṣa epistemology goes beyond religion and speaks to how people encode and transmit their knowledge. It also helps to explain why, for example, despite the long-standing presence of Western education in Yorubaland, until very recently Ifa-Oriṣa practitioners have resisted committing certain types of knowledge to writing. It is not because it could not be written, but because, even more than referring to it as “oral,” seeing it through the lens of VOAK-orientation makes it clear how much reducing it to writing truly does reduce it. The knowledge is more than words on a page but includes the hearing of the utterance and the performance of corresponding motions that at once embodies the energy of the words and also act as mnemonic devices.

As highlighted above, obi speaks kinesthetically by moving through space and coming to rest in various positions, these positions are perceived with the eye but are also uttered by the mouth, heard by the ear, and enacted with the body. Oyeronke Olademo notes that for the Yoruba, the “visible is a reflection of the invisible”¹⁵⁰ and, as such, it is

¹⁵⁰ Oyeronke Olademo, “Religion and Women’s Sexuality in Africa: The Intersection of Power and Vulnerability.” In *Women and New and Africana Religions, Women and Religion in the World*, Lillian

through motion that Ifa-Oriṣa practitioners seek to render their invisible thoughts or states of being in visible form in order to usher in their manifestation. Aṣẹ though invisible to the eye, is able to permeate and interact with the physical world, and as such, moving the air around one's body may change the state of the aṣẹ surrounding an individual. This is exemplified in the signatures of obi, each of which has a corresponding motion that is performed along with a statement of the signature's name or associated incantation. Performing these movements both recalls the meaning of each of the positions, some of the advice attached to it and also to embody and enact the advice.

When the signature of alaafia appears, for example, the practitioner cups her or his hand together and brings them up toward the left shoulder, right shoulder, and then the left again in a motion that resembles hauling something in or tossing something over the shoulder. This motion, along with the elongation and repetition of the word "alaafia" serves to usher in the health and peace promised by the sign, and also acts as a means through which to beseech the obi to accept this message on the second throw. Snapping the fingers of both hands three times usually up near the head and bringing the hands from back to front. This motion awakens the ori, or the inner self, and brings the self into awareness. A reminder to mind one's character, as within the ethics of Ifa-Oriṣa, it is good character that each of us should seek first before anything else. When a person demonstrates good character, all else falls into place as ostensibly, they wouldn't steal, cheat, lie, or engage in

Ashcraft-Eason, Darnise C. Martin, and Oyeronke Olademo, Eds. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2010), 192.

any other activities considered immoral according Ifa-Oriṣa moral standards as encoded in the sixteen laws of Ifa.

When the signature of okan (heart) falls, the thrower and all present will touch their fingers from the chest to the floor three times. With this signature, the obi is advising the practitioner to “fokan bale” (lit: put the heart to the ground/earth) the motion of the practitioner touching the chest and the ground transfers the *aṣe* of the heart to the earth along with any concern that may be held there. For the signature *iṣegun* (victory), practitioner knocks three times on the floor or ground with both hands. This knocking acts as a call to the spirits and also ignites *aṣe* of the earth to rise and assist. My mentor and interlocutor, Baba Oluwole Ifakunle Adetutu Alagbede, has noted that rather than being sky deities, the oriṣa and irunmole are thought to live in the earth, which is why they manifest on the surface of the earth as natural phenomena like rivers, mountains, and trees, including the obi tree.¹⁵¹ For this reason, libations to the oriṣa and ancestors are poured onto the ground or into the waters they are thought to inhabit, and Yorubaland styles of Ifa-Oriṣa ritual dance also have a downward orientation whereby the body is often stooped. This is also a reason why priests who become possessed by the oriṣa, called *ẹlẹgun*, are said to be “mounted” or “climbed” (Y. *gun*) by the spirits, and priests in trance will often lay or roll on the ground while in trance in order to be supported by the earth but also to receive messages from the earth, which acts as a type of conductor through which currents of *aṣe* run.

¹⁵¹ A notable exception to this is Ṣango, the oriṣa associated with lightning and divine justice.

Ejire, the sign of perfect balance, garners the most effusive and varied set of reactions as the motions and utterances are specific to the orisha with whom the practitioner is communicating. Generally speaking, when ejire appears—or obi yan—the orisha has issued some type of declaration and the practitioner therefore greets the orisha in the customary way. The most general of these greetings is touching the forehead to the floor, which is the highest form of humility one can demonstrate both in Ifa-Orisha religion and in Yoruba culture more generally. This is not always the greeting, however, since, as aforementioned, Ifa-Orisha religion is highly indexical with each orisha having her or his own verbal and kinesthetic greetings. In the above vignette, for example, when the obi yan before the sacrifice to Ogun, the crowd shouted “Ogun ye!” and wagged their behinds at the shrine. Had the sacrifice been for Obatala, the caster of the obi would have exclaimed, “Èpa Oriša!” with the crowd responding “Oriša Èpa!” and touching their heads to the ground.¹⁵²

In each of these instances, it becomes clear how inadequate it is to refer to obi—and other Yoruba divination forms which follow similar patterns VOAK-patterns, though to a somewhat lesser extent—as an oral tradition or to say that it is orally maintained. Audition and movement play as significant a role in the teaching and learning of the tradition as do orality and all three serve important epistemic functions. The aural and kinesthetic aspects serve very important functions as aside from acting mnemonically,

¹⁵² In certain environments, in lieu of touching one’s head to the ground it is acceptable to touch one’s forehead, touch the ground, and touch the forehead again to facilitate the same transfer of aṣẹ and indicate the same level of humility.

kinesthesia serves as a means of transmitting religious knowledge to children who are so young as to be pre-verbal. Indeed, it was quite common for me to see very young pre-verbal children repeating the motions associated with obi signatures and other aspects of Ifa-Oriṣa knowledge when they were present during a divination session. Typically, the first stage of learning and the first way in which a child gets to display her or his knowledge is through kinesis; once the obi falls, the child will be given the opportunity to perform the signature's associated motion before the adults present repeat it. In this way, even very young children are able to learn and also to take a leadership role in disseminating information and, because their ability to participate does not rest on reading, writing, or even necessarily speaking, they are often able to reach a high level of proficiency at a young age. As such, religious knowledge may be passed down in a more efficient manner, often being transferred from older child to younger child, such that children do not have to rely exclusively on adults making the knowledge acquisition process more diffuse, dynamic and, arguably, more effective than in other traditions wherein reading, writing, and speaking are the primary means through which information is transferred.

Conclusion

Conceptions and uses of obi, including the ways in which its knowledge is encoded and transferred, help to shed much-needed light on Yoruba ethics and epistemology, which may be extrapolated to other similarly oriented African cultures. The concepts of integrated duality and VOAK-orientation as illustrated by obi have much

to offer the study of African and Diasporic religions as well as the field of Africana philosophy more broadly, and my aim in positing them is to offer a more nuanced and indigenous means through which to view both the Ifa-Oriṣa cosmovision and the ritual action that realizes and reenacts it.

Thinking in terms of integrated duality rather than strict binaries can help us to better understand the both/and—rather than either or—nature of many African religions. It also helps elucidate the ways in which it is possible to think of the obi as both an object and a sentient presence, in the same way that human beings are considered both earthly and divine, having been formed of the same materials as the rest of the earth but being animated by *emi*, which most closely coincides with what Gnostics call the Divine Spark. In addition, thinking in terms of integration helps Ifa-Oriṣa practitioners to understand, process, and move through the ambiguities inherent in life. Although speaking of duality implies two aspects of a thing, it is important to understand that duality as I am using it and as it manifests in Yoruba epistemology implies everything beyond two as well: there are always *at least* two aspects to a thing, but there are generally more. Mei Me Sanford notes that “Yoruba knowledge is profoundly multiple”¹⁵³ and she goes on to speak of the varied seats of authority—from the ancestors, to the oriṣa, to each individual’s ori—with which Ifa-Oriṣa practitioners interface and who “possess their own potencies and knowledge.”¹⁵⁴ In the same way that the multiple lobes of obi work together to present a

¹⁵³ Jacob Kẹhinde Olupona and Rowland Abiodun, *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance, African Expressive Cultures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 133.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

coherent message, so, too, do these multiple authorities work together to guide each individual's life path.

In the same way that Yoruba knowledge is multiple, so are the means of organizing and negotiating that knowledge. Crucial to this is understanding that “knowing” for its own sake is not the goal, but enacting the knowledge in such a way as to build and functionalize it. The prayers, incantations, and reflections uttered, received, and enacted during the course of an obi divination session are intended to provide a snapshot of the universe as it is and to move it into the state in which it ought to be. As the cosmic information obi provides is, as John Mason notes, typically related to one's day-to-day state,¹⁵⁵ it is incumbent on all practitioners to learn obi's language such that they are able to make short-term personal assessments on their own, without needing to consult a religious “authority” to do so on their behalf.

Much like a general practitioner referring a patient to see a specialist, however, if obi reports that information which is deeper beyond the immediate is required, she can and does refer practitioners to the further-reaching forms of divination—erindinlogun or Ifa—in order to access more nuanced information. This demonstrates the multiple and symbiotic nature of Yoruba epistemology in that no one system or individual, whether human or oriṣa, is thought to have an exclusive domain over information. While the scope and duration of the information varies, each snapshot, whether close up or at a wider angle, provides the practitioner with important personal data. As the first point of

155

access for said data, obi helps to equalize and personalize the acquisition of knowledge and also helps to empower practitioners to assess their own moral standing with the oriṣa. It is no coincidence that the *iya obi*, or mother obi, is the primary mouthpiece of the oriṣa as, much like a human mother, *iya obi* can affirm or chide the practitioner, either conferring blessings or bearing warnings or reminders of transgression. The next chapter explores this connection between obi, womanhood and motherhood.

CHAPTER 3 | OF WATER AND WOMEN: OBI AND FEMININE POWER

“Obi da? Olobi da? Nibo ni olobi wa? Ah ah, mu obi wa now!” (Where is the obi? Where is the obi seller? Where is the obi seller? Ah ah, bring the obi now!)

These cries rang throughout the October 2015 day at the home temple of Baba Ifayemi Elebuibon, the Araba, or highest ranking babalawo in the city of Oṣogbo. It was the day of his annual festival which was dedicated to Obatala and Oṣun and which was being hosted by his junior wife, Iyaloriṣa Oyelola Eḷebuibon. Iya Lola, as she is affectionately known, is a prominent oriṣa priestess who has practiced for all of her life and who, in addition to her work performing initiations and mentoring godchildren, produces CDs and DVDs of oriṣa music which she exports around the world along with beaded and metal jewelry and other accoutrements of the tradition.

The temple was abuzz with excitement, packed to the gills, warm, and flowing with the energy of all those who had gathered. Nzinga Metzger has noted that African festivals are typically marked by the characteristics of tightness, temperature, tempo, and a target¹⁵⁶ and this festival day was marked by all of these: the small room was tightly packed making the temperature rise, the crowd moved in polyrhythms, breaking into song or chant here and there with shouted requests for ritual items peppered throughout, and all of those present faced and took turns approaching the target of worship, an altar holding the implements Obatala, Oṣun and other oriṣa.

¹⁵⁶ Nzinga Metzger. “Dancing the Sacred Grove: Ritual Movement and the Creation of Sacred Time and Space: The Example of Oriṣa Religions in the U.S.” Paper presented at the inaugural conference of the African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association, Cambridge, MA, April 5, 2012.

A large part of the experience of visiting the shrine for the festival is receiving a message from Obatala by way of the messenger, obi. Each person who entered the temple on that day bought two obi and waited her turn to approach the shrine where she would give them—along with a small monetary offering—to the attendant priest who would consult Obatala on her behalf. As is often observed in Ifa-Oriṣa practice, the majority of those in the room were women coming to receive blessings for themselves and their families, and the *olobi*, or obi-seller, one of Iya Lola’s young adult daughters, was also a woman. Despite her demonstrated exasperation at being incessantly summoned, part of her seemed to relish in being at the center of the temple’s attention and having such an important duty and she delivered each obi with a smile and a simple prayer of *adura yoo gba* (your prayers will be accepted).

Having bought my own obi, I held them in my hand along with a 1,000-naira bill¹⁵⁷ and said prayers for a positive message, asking for the three standard blessings—*omo, owo, aiku* (children, money, long life)—in addition to voicing some more specifically pointed concerns while I waited my turn. When the moment arrived, I was summoned forward and handed my obi and money to the priest, who was one of the Araba’s nephews. He bathed the obi in water momentarily, touched them to my head and chest and then continued to pray for me as he split the first one open. When he cast it on my behalf, it delivered the message of *iwa* (character) which the throw of the second obi confirmed as the missive I was to take from the reading for the day. It serves as a

¹⁵⁷ Approximately USD \$5 in October 2015.

reminder that no matter how many rituals one does, blessings come through good works and moral actions. I touch my forehead to the floor in thanks for the reminder and in obeisance to the subservience of the head to the heart and to my woman's intuition; we always know what is right in our hearts, the task is to quiet the mind and act accordingly.



“The cosmos could and should be considered the Womb of Wombs,” says Teresa N. Washington. “While the comparison of the universe to a womb highlights the significance of the womb of woman the analogy is not merely for illustrative purposes. What happens in the womb of every woman reflects what is happening throughout the Cosmos.”¹⁵⁸ This reflection, Washington goes onto note, is evident in the fact that as the cosmos nurtures life—and also, at times, destroys it—and as humans eat, sleep, and breathe the cosmos as we are completely enveloped in it, so does a child in utero eat, sleep, and breathe the womb which completely envelopes them. The womb is dark and, while cramped, it is also expansive and filled with infinite creative possibilities. The womb “ensures existence” as it is currently the only portal available into the mortal world. The womb is powerful and for this reason, it is lauded but also feared as are its owners: women.

This chapter is an examination of Yoruba concepts of women and feminine power with attention to the ways in which obi, and the element of water—which is also

¹⁵⁸ Teresa N. Washington, *The Architects of Existence: Aje in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature* (Oya's Tornado, 2014), 3.

identified with women— embodies these concepts. As I will show, despite the sometimes-ambiguous position in which women and their influence are placed, feminine power remains central to Ifa-Oriṣa epistemology and practice.

From Powerful Women to Witches

Despite Oyeronke Oyewunmi's now famous assertion to the contrary, gender has always played a central role in Yoruba society.¹⁵⁹ In examining Oyewunmi's claim that "Yorubas don't do gender"¹⁶⁰ and that all aspects of pre-Colonial Yoruba society were strictly based on seniority, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf notes that Oyewunmi fails to account for the ways in which gender constructs, seniority, and other power dynamics work *together* in governing societal interactions.¹⁶¹ Although, as Oyewunmi asserts, age, lineage, and other markers of social status augmented the gender category, there are many Yoruba proverbs and verses of Ifa which demonstrate that a certain level of ambiguity about feminine power existed in the Yoruba world-sense prior to contact with the European cultural and religious influences which Oyewunmi credits with introducing the category

¹⁵⁹ See Oyeronke Oyewunmi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Oyewunmi suggests that, to use Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's words, "Yorubas don't do gender" and that, prior to European contact, Yoruba society was not ordered according to gender but according to lineage and seniority. Bakare-Yusuf offers a sustained critique of Oyewunmi's argument in her article "'Yorubas Don't Do Gender': A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewunmi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*." *African Identities* (Vol. 1, No.1, 2003), 121-142.

¹⁶⁰ This is the title of Bakare-Yusuf's critical essay about Oyewunmi's book, *The Invention of Women*.

¹⁶¹ Bakare-Yusuf, 5.

of gender into Yoruba society. A small sampling of representative proverbs demonstrate this orientation:¹⁶²

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>Obinrin l'eke, obinrin l'odale</i> | The woman is a gossip, the woman is a traitor |
| 2. <i>E ma finu ha f'obinrin</i> | Never confide in a woman |
| 3. <i>Eniyan to ko gbon ni i bobinrin mule; ijo obinrin bo mawo lo baje</i> | It is an unwise person who takes an oath with a woman. They day a woman knows the secrets, they are spoiled |
| 4. <i>E ma je ka finu han f'obinrin; ibi ti oju re o to, enu re debe</i> | Do not reveal your secrets to women; her mouth will speak more than her eyes can see |
| 5. <i>Obinrin ko ni gogongo</i> | Women have no "Adam's apple" (i.e., they cannot keep secrets) |
| 6. <i>Awo buruku lobinrin le še; obinrin lale mefa mefeḡfa o mora wḡn</i> | It is only bad secrets that women can keep; a woman may have six lovers and the six will not know each other |
| 7. <i>Gbogbo obinrin lo n gbeseḡ, eyi ti o ba še tirḡ laḡeju laraye n pe laḡewo</i> | All women engage in infidelity; it is the ones who is excessive that is called a prostitute |

It is of note that each of these proverbs and many others like them refer specifically to the realms of knowledge and sexuality, the two domains where women's power is considered the most ambiguous and, therefore, potentially threatening. Rowland Abiḡdun notes, for instance, that men sometimes fear moving close to particularly powerful priestesses of

¹⁶² Proverbs 1-4 from "Women in Yoruba Proverbs," Nigeria Content Online, <http://nigeriang.com/entertainment/women-in-yoruba-proverbs/8072/> (March 13, 2011); proverbs 5-7 from "(Un)Popular Images of Women in Yoruba Popular Culture – A Quest for Human Dignity," ResearchGate, accessed April 11, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258212056_UnPopular_Images_of_Women_in_Yoruba_Popular_Culture_-_A_Quest_for_Human_Dignity.

Oṣun, the embodiments of feminine power, for fear that they will be rendered sexually impotent. Within the Yoruba world-sense, women embody the same creative and destructive *aṣẹ* that is present in the universe itself placing them in a precarious social position whereby their creative function is lauded and their destructive potential loathed.

Oyeronke Olademo speaks about women's agency and the great power that is attributed to them when she draws attention to verses from the sacred Yoruba orature in which the creator and source of the universe, Olodumare, endowed women with the power of the *aje*¹⁶³ which is said to have given women powers that exceed those of men, and that women were advised not to use their powers indiscriminately.¹⁶⁴ She also notes that wisdom is often attributed to women owing to their creative link with the divine but that this has positive and negative aspects: positive in that women are thought able to multitask and “manage difficult situations successfully,” and negative in that their wisdom “could manifest as craftiness and deceit.”¹⁶⁵ This tension, which is demonstrated most markedly in reference to women's sexuality, gives rise to a sort of Madonna-Whore dichotomy whereby the creative potential—as embodied in the trope of motherhood—is extolled while the destructive potential—which is embodied in women who are not one's

¹⁶³ Often translated as “witches” but that translation is contested on a number of fronts, including by Olademo herself in the same text.

¹⁶⁴ Olajubu, 27.

¹⁶⁵ Oyeronke Olademo, “Religion and Women's Sexuality in Africa: The Intersection of Power and Vulnerability.” In *Women and New and Africana Religions, Women and Religion in the World*, Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, Darnise C. Martin, and Oyeronke Olademo (Eds.) (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 199.

relatives, most especially the trope of the wife—is suspect.¹⁶⁶ From a man’s point of view and that of his family, his wife is considered a “stranger” to the family, and therefore potentially dangerous, until she has had a child with the man. At this point, she becomes a blood relative through the child and her destructive potential is reduced, though not completely eliminated. Women who have passed childbearing age and whose creative potential has ended, particularly if widowed and no longer under the social control of men, are typically considered especially threatening and have traditionally been accused of “witchcraft” or other anti-social acts more frequently than women still of childbearing age.

While these negative views of women existed prior to the introduction of Christianity and Islam, views of women’s power were further corrupted by the entry these decidedly male-centric traditions and their associated knowledge systems into Yorubaland. Washington notes that any deity that was not associated with an Abrahamic tradition was labeled “a jinn, a devil, a witch, or a whore.” This, she notes, was not by happenstance, but came as a result of “carefully orchestrated attempts to assassinate character, consciousness, culture, and [indigenous gods].”¹⁶⁷ One way in which this was enacted, was through, as Oyeronke Olademo asserts, a post-contact devaluation of women in the religious sphere. As she notes:

Though patriarchy existed before the advent of Islam and Christianity to Yorubaland, the influences of patriarchy on women since the coming of these two religions has been momentous. This is closely

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 196.

¹⁶⁷ Washington, *Architects of Existence*, 207.

linked to the subservient prescription of both religions for women, in contrast to Yoruba religion, which allowed for female participation at all levels. With the coming of Christianity and Islam women were encouraged to be satisfied with being appendages of men and their husbands.¹⁶⁸

Of note in her statement is the idea that women's participation was allowed at all levels within the traditional religion and alludes to the fact that not only religion changed with the coming of Christianity and Islam, but also culture and core values, which are much harder to recover. As Christianity became indigenized, moving away from the mission models and into what is commonly known as the *aladura* movement, leadership opportunities arose for women as prophets and healers, underscoring their "natural" connection to divinity, but the roles of preacher and teacher, the keeping and dissemination of knowledge, shifted into being seen as exclusively male domains.¹⁶⁹

Another way in which this shift in women's influence, and the power of the indigenous religion more broadly, was enacted was through language. It is no coincidence that the two most powerful personalities within the Yoruba world-sense—Eṣu, as the guardian of the crossroads and the one who carries prayers from human beings to both sides of the cosmos, and Oṣun, as manifest in the feminine principle and women, more generally—became the most demonized and derided when Christianity was introduced into Yorubaland. To undermine these two forces was to undermine the entire system as J.D.Y. Peel notes with regard to Eṣu:

¹⁶⁸ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (State University of New York Press, 2003), 41.

¹⁶⁹ Olademo, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 46.

[W]hen the missions syncretized Eṣu with the Devil, they completely changed his relationship with God: instead of being a mediator between God and man, he becomes God's antithesis and adversary... Then, because in the missionary view the other oriṣa are generically 'works of Satan,' Eṣu as the Devil becomes magnified as the quintessence and personification of 'heathenism' overall.¹⁷⁰

Likewise, rather than an integrated part of a humanity which consists of and relies on both male and female for its propagation, this shift in world-sense presented women as men's antithesis and adversary, a potential problem that needed to be controlled. After all, in the newly introduced Biblical narratives, it was Eve—a woman—who was responsible for the downfall of man through the commission of the "original sin."

Just as Eṣu was translated as "Satan," changing his relationship to the divine and to humanity, words that were formerly associated with women's power were also translated in injurious ways that also changed their relationships with the divine. Chief Iyanifa Fagbemileke Jones-Brown notes, for example, that *iyami osaronga*—typically erroneously translated as "witches"—literally translates to "my mothers bring me the gift of astral travel,"¹⁷¹ referring both to the fact that women have special access to esoteric knowledge as well as the fact that it is through mothers that human beings are able to travel from the spiritual realm into the physical. Although mothers are lauded for this indispensable contribution to the continuation of humanity, and the *iyami* and *aje* embody

¹⁷⁰ J. D. Y. Peel, "The Pastor and the 'Babalawo': The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, (Vol. 60, No. 3, 1990), , 355.

¹⁷¹ Fagbemileke Jones-Brown Fatunmise "The Mothers Re-Aligning and Shifting Global Views Producing a New World Paradigm (NWP) for the 21st Century" in *Iyanifa: Woman of Wisdom*, Ayele Kumari (ed.) (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 60. See also Olademo, "Women's Sexuality in Africa," 200.

this facility, as Jones-Brown asserts that many babalawo (priests of Ifa), in particular, bought into the corruption of women's power and their casting as "witches,"¹⁷² likely because de-centralizing women's authority helped to buttress their own, especially by male-centric European standards.

Water as Women, Woman as Water

Despite both indigenous and foreign-borne circumspection of feminine power, it remains an indispensable force, as illustrated through Ifa-Oriṣa sacred narratives. One of the most well-known and oft-cited stories in the 256-odu corpus of Ifa illustrates the powerful yet precarious position women occupy. The odu *oṣe otura* and tells a story of the beginnings of the earth at which time 16 male and one female *irunmole* (primordial deities) are dispatched from the spiritual realm to put things in order on earth. Upon arrival, the 16 males summarily disregard the input of the one female, Oṣun. Things go haywire: crops will not grow, the rivers will not flow, women will not become pregnant, nothing the male deities do will work and they continually dismiss Oṣun when she offers her assistance. They return to *orun* (the spiritual realm) and, upon hearing their complaints about what has been happening on earth, Olodumare asks them one simple question: "Where is Oṣun?" As the story concludes, Olodumare directs the male *irunmole*

¹⁷² Oyeronke Olademo, "Religion and Women's Sexuality in Africa," 198.

to go back and beg Ọṣun’s forgiveness for mistreating her. Without her input, they are told, nothing on earth will work properly. A refrain from the odu confirms:

Whoever pounds yam without the consent of Ọṣun
The *iyán* (pounded yam) will be full of lumps
Whoever stirs yam flour
And gives no vantage place to Ọṣun
The *amala* (yam flour) will be too soft
Whatever food that is prepared without Ọṣun
The food will not be good
We are now complete in taking decision
Ọṣun is of vital essence¹⁷³

Upon receiving this message, the male irunmole return to earth and proceed to beg Ọṣun’s forgiveness. As it turns out, she is pregnant and she tells the male irunmole that because of the way they’ve treated her, she will not help them if her child is female but she will help if it is male. The child in her womb was, in fact, female. But, to save the earth and ensure its continuity, Obalata, who is charged with molding children in the womb, upon seeing that the child was female, covertly reached into her womb and changed the child’s gender to male. All were joyous upon the male child’s birth knowing that Ọṣun would indeed do her crucial job in the world of making things run, and run smoothly. The child who was born from Ọṣun’s womb was Eṣu, the guardian of the crossroads, divine messenger, and the one who teaches lessons to those who commit moral infractions. When all was said and done, they chanted:

Ọṣun is of vital relevance
Ọṣun we seek your consent in all issues
Nobody can be an enemy of water
We use it to bathe

¹⁷³ Ibid. I have slightly adapted the wording from that which Olademo cites.

We drink water
 We meet water at every turn
 Water can never be disgraced
 Join me and shout
 Oṣun ore Yeye o!¹⁷⁴

While this story is frequently invoked to herald the power of women and their indispensability, it also demonstrates women's vulnerability, particularly vis a vis men. After all, the men were able to exclude Oṣun from their dealings and the male orisha Obatala was able to reach into her very womb and change the sex of the child within. Still, as the fate of earth rested on Oṣun's autonomy and her decision to assist despite the mistreatment to which she was subjected, the story centralizes not only women's power, but also their compassion and capacity for forgiveness. Both of these require recognizing the worth and value in others human beings, which the odu Ifa *oṣe oturupon* positions as a virtue and one best demonstrated through the fair treatment of women. It states:

<i>Eeyan ti o mo eeyan leeyan</i>	A person who does not appreciate the value of fellow human beings
<i>Eeyan ti o ba ko ede de le</i>	A person who does not recognize the importance of fellow human beings
<i>Nii pe tobinrin o si laye...</i>	A person who is not well learned Is the person who will say
<i>Ki won ma foju di oun o</i>	A woman does not amount to anything in life...
<i>O ni eni to ba dori bale</i>	Let nobody underestimate or be insolent to her
<i>Yoo ma laje</i>	Those who show her respect
<i>Yoo maa laya</i>	They will be blessed with wealth
<i>Yoo maa bimo</i>	They will be blessed with spouse
<i>Yoo ma de be aiku wa</i>	They will be blessed with children
<i>Kenikan ma wipe eni ateyinyo lobinrin o</i>	They will be blessed with longevity Let no one use negative language on women ¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. Again, I have slightly adapted the wording.

¹⁷⁵ Kumari, 121.

The above verses of *ose otura* and *ose oturupon* make several conceptual moves. In the first case, *ose otura* introduces us to the archetypal feminine entity (Ọṣun) and establishes her “vital relevance” by referencing her as water and water as her, suggesting their mutual embodiment. This connection is further demonstrated by the fact that most all female oriṣa are associated with specific bodies of water: Ọṣun with the Ọṣun river, Yemoja with the Ogun river, Ọya with the Niger (known in Yoruba as *odo Ọya*), and Oba with the Oba river, among others. As water and women are indispensable to the propagation of life, both working together in the case of the amniotic water of the womb, in stating that “nobody can be an enemy of water” the verse also implies that nobody can (or should) be an enemy of women. The verses of *ose oturupon* echo this sentiment and go further into highlighting the blessings that flow from adhering to the sacred edict, handed down directly from Olodumare in *ose otura*. Those who respect women are promised the blessings of wealth, a spouse, children, and long life, the four cardinal blessings within the Ifa-Oriṣa world-sense. Recognizing and respecting women worth is, therefore, coded as an ethical action that adds value to human life assuring positive outcomes for those who comply and negative outcomes, like those noted in the verses of *ose otura*, for those who do not.

Obi and Feminine Power

Obi is a feminine entity and, perhaps owing to this, an object that is highly associated with both water and human women. With the ability to produce both male and

female within her womb-like pod, obi embodies the power of procreation which, Oyeronke Olademo notes, imbues women with a certain exalted societal status and level of respect within Yoruba society.¹⁷⁶ Procreative potential is central not only to women's power, but also to Ifa-Oriṣa concepts of power more broadly and there are several aspects of ritual that mimic the procreative process. During the process of Ifa divination using *ikin*,¹⁷⁷ for example, the marking of an *odù* is often referred to as “birthing” the *odù* with the well in the face of the *opon Ifá* (divining board), therefore serving as a metaphorical womb. Before making the markings, the *babalawo* (Ifa priest) taps the *opon Ifá* with the *iroke*, a long conical instrument often featuring an internal clapper, like a bell. As he taps, he makes prayers and incantations, summoning the divine energy of the *oriṣa* of destiny, *Orunmila*, to the divination. *Babalawo Oluwole Ifakunle Adetutu Alagbede* explains that this tapping might be said to represent the act of intercourse—with the *opon Ifá* representing the vagina and womb, the *iroke* representing the penis—which eventually results in the implantation and birthing of the *odu* within the *opon*.¹⁷⁸ Because of this, it is generally considered improper for women to *dafa*, or divine using *ikin*.

Another illustrative practice is that of painting initiates with *efun* (kaolin clay chalk) and *osun* (camwood) during the process of initiating an individual into the *egbe* of

¹⁷⁶ Olademo, “Religion and Women’s Sexuality in Africa,” 197.

¹⁷⁷ There are two ways in which Ifa divination is conducted, one using 16 palm nuts (*ikin Ifa*), a divining board (*opon Ifa*), and divining powder (*iyerosun*) and the other using a divining chain (*opele*). For detailed information on Ifa divination and examination of these two methods, see William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991).

¹⁷⁸ Personal communication, February 2012.

a particular oriša. Efun, being white, and osun, being red represent semen and the blood of the womb, respectively, and with the mixture of these elements on the skin of an individual undergoing initiation, she or he is transformed into a new being, reborn of the cosmic womb. While red stands constant as the color of blood, in some instances white represents not the male principle, but breastmilk. It is of note that the two colors in which obi is produced are red and white, the colors of blood and breastmilk, respectively. These two powerful and life-sustaining substances—both primarily composed of water—are, as Olademo explains, considered extremely potent as women are thought to be able to use both for bestowing blessings or curses¹⁷⁹ further demonstrating the ambiguous nature of their power. Despite the fact that obi enacts this duality in her ability to pronounce *ire* (gains) and *ibi* (losses), her power, like that of blood and breastmilk, is primarily considered positive and, more importantly, understood as necessary.

Aside from the procreative connection, obi, like women, are also to negotiate the space between the spiritual and physical realms. While the image of blessings “raining from above” is a constant in many religious imaginaries, in the Yoruba world-sense, one is said to “dig out” or excavate blessings.¹⁸⁰ As such, like other flora employed in Ifa-Oriša practice, in growing from the earth—itsself a feminine entity—obi brings deep knowledge with her to the surface and this knowledge is revealed through further excavation by way of removing obi from her pod, outer covering, and, finally, the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Elebuibon, 134.

opening of her very body. In the same way that the cervix must open to allow a child to pass from the womb, so too must the obi open to facilitate the flow of vital information between herself and the other divine entities for whom she speaks.

To activate this flow, as noted in chapter 2, obi must be bathed inside and out before it may be used and the diviner, too, must be clean both physically and mentally before casting obi. As such, water is an indispensable part of the obi divination process and deeply linked with obi. In her treatise on the powers ascribed to the sea in various religious traditions, Kimberley Patton discusses notions of ritual purity. While partially accepting Mary Douglas's assertion that the concept of religious "contamination" refers to moral and ethical states, rather than actual "dirt," she asserts that there are instances whereby the contamination is, in fact, physical.¹⁸¹ This holds true in the case of obi, as the bathing is intended to remove any physical debris from the surface of the obi and also to remove the energy of anyone who had previously handled the obi and render it into a ritually pure state. A verse from the odu Ifa oturupon ofun speaks to obi's ability to cleanse a person who has committed an infraction, and who is considered morally dirty, in order to save him or her from death and plead on his or her behalf:

<i>Oturupon fun bisi bisi</i>	Oturupon fun
<i>A difa fun eleeri</i>	Ifa divination was performed for the dirty person ¹⁸²
<i>Yio maa fi obi bee iku</i>	Who was going to use obi to beg death
<i>Kini alade fi obi se</i>	What does Orunmila use obi to do?
<i>Oyin ni alade fi obi se</i>	Orunmila uses obi to protect himself
<i>Kini alade fi obi se</i>	What does Orunmila use obi to do?

¹⁸¹ Kimberley C. Patton. *The Sea Can Wash Away All Evils: Modern Marine Pollution and the Ancient Cathartic Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 80.

¹⁸² "Dirty" here refers to moral infraction morally dirty.

Ipe ni alade fi obi se

Orunmila uses obi to plead¹⁸³

The verse, which is sometimes recited while bathing the obi, reminds the practitioner both of the importance of cleanliness and also the power of obi to remove spiritual blemishes and appease the forces on the left side of the universe. Once purified, the obi is then charged with the *aṣẹ* of the *oriṣa* being consulted and the individual for whom the consultation is being made by bringing the obi into physical contact with both, touching it to the head and heart of the petitioner and to the sacred implements of the *oriṣa*. Thus charged, obi is prepared to do her work of translating messages from the *oriṣa* to the practitioner, aiding in the assessment of his or her moral state and, if deemed necessary, assisting in her or his purification.

Turning to obi's relationship with human women, obi is typically excavated from its pod and inner covering by women's hands and is most often sold by women. One of my research participants, Babalawo Fayemi Abidemi, noted that the *odu Ifa ogbe iwori* says it is women and, in particular, specifically, *oriṣa* priestesses and the wives of *Ifa* priests (called *apetebii*) should always be the ones to sell obi. Within the verse, sellers of obi are promised long life and wellness, as it is obi who is able to avert death, sickness, and other destructive forces.¹⁸⁴ By selling and staying close to obi, these women have consistent access to this important object-entity that they are able to harness both for themselves and their families.

¹⁸³ Recited by Fayemi Abidemi Fakayode, February 26, 2015.

¹⁸⁴ Personal Communication, February 26, 2015.

In addition to selling obi, women interact most often with obi as they are typically the ones who present obi to the orisha on behalf of themselves and their families on their respective worship days. Araba Ifayemi Elebuibon gives an accounting of the development of the worship days for the orisha noting that, at one point, all of the orisha were being consulted—and were in turn consulting Orunmila, the orisha associated with wisdom—in a random fashion. To bring order and control the flow of information, Obatala the creative orisha, instated worship days (*ose*¹⁸⁵) for each of the orisha. He claimed the first day for himself, while he gave the next day to Orunmila; the following day was allocated to Ogun, and the last day to Şango, for a total of four days.¹⁸⁶ All other orisha were to share the worship days with, for example, Oşun sharing the day with her husband Orunmila, Osoosi sharing with Ogun, and Oya sharing with Şango.

Worshippers typically offer obi to their particular orisha on their day(s) of worship.¹⁸⁷ During my time in Nigeria, and particularly in Oşogbo, I frequently witnessed women fulfilling this duty, offering obi on behalf of themselves and their husbands and children. As noted in chapter 2, when offering obi, the practitioner uses it to divine the orisha's satisfaction as well as to glean messages from the orisha during the offering process. I had occasion to sit with Iya Lola Elebuibon, who is initiated to Obatala, on one

¹⁸⁵ Worship days are referenced as “Ose [orisa]” whereby [orisa] is replaced by the name of the orisha to whom the dy is dedicated, as in “Ose Ogun.” It is unclear to me why the word “ose,” meaning “week,” is used rather than the word “ojo” meaning “day.”

¹⁸⁶ Elebuibon, *The Adventures of Obatala* Vol. 1, 27.

¹⁸⁷ An individual's initiations determine how many days he or she would offer obi. For example, someone initiated to Obatala and Oşun might offer obi to Obatala on his day and also to Oşun on Orunmila's day, which she shares with him.

of his worship days and to participate in this process with her. On this day, she offered obi for herself and then, one by one, for each of her children, making note of the orisha's messages for each of them, offering approximately 40 obi altogether to various orisha on behalf of her loved ones, including two which she offered on my behalf. Although her children are mostly grown and all, having been trained in orisha worship and obi divination,¹⁸⁸ could potentially have performed this ritual on their own behalf, she explained to me that, as a mother and wife, it remained her duty to pray for and deliver messages to her children and husband. Discerning the messages of obi, or any of the other divination media, often relies on asking the right questions and a mother often has the wherewithal to ask questions that her children—even grown ones—might not.

As aforementioned, the four-lobed obi most often used for divination is called *iya obi* (mother obi) which can confer blessings or bear warnings. This speaks to the role the *iya obi* is expected to fulfill, in protecting and providing information to devotees as well as inscribing what Zifikile Gambahaya and Itai Muwati call the “philosophical and operational paradigm” of motherhood onto obi. As they note:

Motherhood transcends being a mere biological designation to a philosophical and operational paradigm that ensures strategic intervention in crises while simultaneously serving as the community's strategic life-support resource.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ I have also been trained and could have offered my own obi as well, but it is customary for a priest to offer obi on behalf of a visitor who has come to his or her home.

¹⁸⁹ Quoted in Itai Muwati, Zifikile Gambahaya, and Tavengwa Gwekwerere. “Africana Womanism and African Proverbs: Theoretical Grounding of Mothering/Motherhood in Shona and Ndebele Cultural Discourse.” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* (Vol. 35, No. 1, 2011), 4.

In her role as mother, obi embodies this paradigm, acting as the conduit through which an individual's most immediate concerns are revealed, thus helping to keep each person—and the community, by extension—in a state of balance. Various verses of the Ifa corpus refer to obi as a feminine spirit and divine messenger who has the power to interpret information provided by the orisha such that human beings may understand it. While obi began as an *irunmole* (primordial deity),¹⁹⁰ she came to serve the other orisha due to an act of infidelity. As the story goes:

Obi had two husbands, one in *orun* (the spiritual realm) and one in *aye* (earth, the physical realm). She served both faithfully, moving back and forth between them and interpreting messages for them such that they both became great diviners and, eventually, rivals. Each thought he held a special advantage in having the powerful obi as a wife and wondered how the other was able to compete with him. One day, suspicious about where obi was going when she left the house, obi's husband in *aye* followed her to *orun* and watched as she entered her other husband's home.

Enraged as his suspicion was confirmed, he waited until she left and then he knocked on the door to consult with the other husband. After commiserating about how they had both been duped by obi, they hatched a plan to punish her. The two husbands quickly rushed back to obi's home in *aye* and waited; when she entered the house, they captured her in a sack of leaves and threw her high up into a tree, leaving her to die. But obi did not die—in fact, the leaf fell in love with her and became her faithful husband,

¹⁹⁰ See footnote 39 on page 31.

replacing the former two. In return for his favor, obi vowed never to be separated from her new husband noting that anytime they were separated, she would dry out and die. Since then, the obi has grown inside of a pod shrouded by a leafy skin and she always travels wrapped in leaves. With the leaf protecting her, obi was able to travel much further than before and news of her power spread; she became more popular than she had ever been and she was soon the favored food of most all of the oriṣa and they all entrusted her with their messages for humanity. She, in turn, vowed to always deliver their edicts faithfully and without distortion.



This story is illustrative of many things not only about the nature of obi but also about the complex nature of Ifa-Oriṣa ethics, marital relationships, and women's power and autonomy. Though it has waned since the beginning of widespread conversion to Christianity in the early 20th century, polygyny—the marriage of one man to multiple wives—is culturally acceptable and is still common amongst Yoruba who practice Ifa-Oriṣa and Islam. While, in contrast, polyandry—one woman having multiple husbands—is typically frowned upon and considered a taboo, there are several Yoruba proverbs which speak to the real possibility of women's engagement in clandestine relationships and, perhaps, even an unofficial sanction to engage in them. One oft-quoted proverb states, for instance, that *a kii bere l'owò adelebo pe nbo lo ti royun* (no one asks a married woman where she got her pregnancy from) which is often interpreted to mean, simply, that one should not inquire about the obvious. Taken another way, however, it might imply that a man should not question his wife so long as she is fulfilling her wifely duties—those duties, in this instance, being attending to her husband sexually. Were she

not satisfying this requirement, her husband might be justified in questioning the source of her pregnancy but, if she is, a child with whom she becomes pregnant should be assumed to be his regardless its actual source.

This latter interpretation has often been paired with another proverb which states that “only a woman knows the identity of her child’s father” and has been used to argue that although polyandry and public extramarital affairs are taboo for Yoruba women, as indicated in proverbs number six and seven on page 103 above, they are often assumed to engage in secret affairs despite the taboo. These proverbs seem to suggest that as long as women continue to fulfill their duties to their husbands and ensure that their affairs are kept secret, they ought not be questioned. Despite having engaged in the seemingly unethical act of keeping two husbands, for example, obi was fair in her dealings with them, shielded them from knowledge of each other, and helped them both equally; it was, in fact, only their inordinate prying that caused confusion. In turn, what was supposed to be a punishment for obi turned into a blessing in that even though she became a servant of the other divinities, it is her role of service which afforded her much acclaim throughout the world and increased her power. At the same time, the husbands hurt themselves as, rather than sharing obi’s power between themselves, they now had to share her special gift with the world. Illustrating the both-and orientation characteristic of Yoruba ideology, obi’s actions while it could be considered morally wrong, was the catalyst for making communion with the orisha by way of obi divination accessible to all humanity.

Adding to the complexity of obi’s position is the fact that in order to facilitate communication, like the other flora used in Ifa-Oriša ritual, she must sacrifice her life.

The knowledge corpuses of Ifa and those of erindinlogun provide narratives to explain how the many different plants and animals used within the tradition came to earth and how they came to the service of humans and the oriṣa. In these narratives, the flora and fauna are anthropomorphized, and it is typically the case that they go to diviners to investigate their fate and are, subsequently, advised to offer the corresponding sacrifice; their compliance, or lack thereof, directs the course of the story. These may be considered moral tales that encourage human participation in instances of what Mircea Eliade terms the “eternal return,” whereby they enact the same mythical process of receiving divination and performing the prescribed sacrifice as doing so is thought to ensure positive life outcomes.

A narrative from the corpus of erindinlogun¹⁹¹ says that kola failed to offer a prescribed sacrifice that would have saved her and her children from the fate of being consistently killed and eaten. As the story goes, divination was performed for obi at which time she was advised to offer 14,000 cowries, a knife, a calabash, and cloth, among other items in order to save her children from death. She weighed the sacrifice versus the number of children she would have in comparison to how many people would eventually kill and eat and, having considered this, decided not to perform the sacrifice. Eṣu then, in what seems a swift and immediate meting of consequence, publicly declared ceremonies incomplete without the presence of obi and, from that point on, people began

¹⁹¹ Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*, 631.

to kill and eat the obi.¹⁹² They used the knife that she failed to sacrifice to open the pods—which Bascom notes are equated with the unoffered calabash—and to peel off the inner shroud that surrounds the obi,¹⁹³ represented by the cloth that obi did not sacrifice.

This story, like that of obi and her two husbands, shows her behaving in a morally ambiguous manner and presents a sort of paradox. Had obi not ended up in the predicament with her two husbands, she would not have come to be with her third and final husband, the leaf, who assisted her in coming to fame. Had she complied with making the sacrifice in the second story, obi would not be available for human use in communicating with the orisha. These stories exemplify the both-and nature of the Yoruba world-sense and the many ways in which adversity can become blessing.

Conclusion

The documented events of obi's life—particularly the morally ambiguous ones—were, it seems, a part of her ultimate destiny. Not unlike humans who often face hardship and hard decisions on the road to their accomplishments, obi made choices that ultimately led her to where she was meant to be. The story of her life, like the stories of many of the other orisha, imparts important lessons about experiences including loss, gain, loyalty, betrayal, punishment, reward, exaltation and service. It is these varied dualistic

¹⁹² As noted in chapter 1, obi is customarily bitten and eaten after it is used for divination. This represents the practitioner taking part in the offering being made to the orisa.

¹⁹³ See figure 5 in chapter 1.

encounters that make obi a fitting mouthpiece to report information about these same these types of happenings in the lives of human beings.

As the bodies of human women serve as conduits to bring human beings from the spiritual realm into the physical, obi's body serves as a conduit to bring messages from the spiritual realm into the physical. Through the sacrifice of her body, obi is able to avail humans of their own impending blessings and losses, the oriṣa's feelings of contentment or displeasure with them, and when they should remain on the course they are on or change directions, among other information. In the next chapter, we will see how another, similar object-entity—the coconut—serves the same function.

CHAPTER 4 | FROM KOLA TO COCO: DIASPORIC CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

“Ago obi!”¹⁹⁴ I called just before my hammer made contact with the seam of the coconut I was holding in my left hand. I hit it once, twice, and on the third time I felt its cool water begin to escape between my fingers as the shell gave way, and I placed a small bowl underneath my hand to catch it. After allowing the coconut’s water to drain out into the bowl, I continued cracking it with the hammer and then using a dull knife to separate the hard, brown outer shell from the white meat. I cut five pieces of the coconut meat to roughly the same size and rounded shape; the remaining meat would be grated for use in a *rogacion de cabeza* or head rogation for my goddaughter Oyafemi.

Elder priest Baba Bill Olaitan Lowman has called the head rogation one of the most important ceremonies within *Lukumi*, a diasporic variant of Ifa-Orisha.¹⁹⁵ During this ceremony, as with many other *Lukumi* rituals, a number of botanical elements, including grated coconut and shea butter, are combined to create a mixture that is then charged with the *aṣẹ* of the priest conducting the ritual by way her praying over and blowing her breath onto the mixture. Having activated the sacred concoction, the priest then applies it to the recipient’s head and other cardinal points on the body with the aim of “cooling” and rebalancing the energy of the personal divinity which resides in the head, known as *ori*.

Oyafemi sat in a chair and the pieces of coconut I had cut rested in a bowl of water at her feet, waiting for the beginning of the ceremony. Known in the diaspora as

¹⁹⁴ This is a call to announce oneself to the coconut, from the Yoruba phrase “ago ile” which one uses to announce oneself when arriving at the home of another person.

¹⁹⁵ Personal communication, September 2014.

obi, four of the five pieces of coconut would be used to interpret messages from the deities—the fifth piece was there in case one broke in the course of the ceremony and needed to be replaced. I began with a standard *ijuba* (paying of homage, prayer) and concluded with extemporaneous prayer during which I asked for the blessings of a cool head for both Oyafemi and myself, as the priest performing the ritual. As no deity can bless one without the sanction of one's *ori*, or personal divinity, I prayed that both her *ori* and mine would accept all of the blessings meant for us and would block those things that would prove unbeneficial. After rendering the prayers, throwing *obi*, and receiving the go ahead to continue with the ceremony, I applied the cool, sweet-smelling mixture to Oyafemi's head and the other specified points of her body. I then lit two white penny candles, and handed them to her to hold.

“Do I have to hold these until they burn out?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Probably not, but... we'll see now that you asked,” I half-joked.

We sat in silence, save for the gentle hum of traffic outside the window of my Harlem apartment. Oyafemi's breath was slow and even, her eyes closed in contemplation as the candles flickered in her hands. After some time, I approached her and used the *obi* to ask the spirits if she had sat long enough. I posed the question and threw: no. She'd need to sit longer. I left her to her quiet contemplation for a while longer, returning periodically to ask if the time had come for us to end the ritual and each time the answer was no. The hour grew later and later and we both grew more and more tired, but each time I asked for her release—and my own since I had to stay awake and alert until we had concluded—the answer was not yet.

“See, you asked that question,” I began, with a chuckle “and it seems they took it seriously.”

I picked up the obi and, with a deep breath, I asked if she did, in fact, need to remain seated in prayer until the candles had burned out. I tossed the obi: *Ejife*. Yes, most definitely. And so, she sat.

When the candles had almost burned out I decided to seek mercy once again. I approached her for a final time and asked if she could rise under the stipulation that she go directly to bed to continue her contemplation through her dreams. To this proposition, the spirits agreed. I threw the obi thrice more to find out where the rogation should go once removed from her head. On the first throw, I asked if it should be thrown in the garbage. No. On the second, I inquired about the crossroads. No. Finally, Oyafemi said: “The river?”

“Can *I* do this?” I gently chided as I threw the obi for the final time, echoing her question.

Ejife.



This chapter examines the transformation of obi’s knowledge and divination into the African Diaspora, with a focus on obi as utilized by African American practitioners in United States.¹⁹⁶ The majority of African Americans who practice Ifa-Oriṣa practice the

¹⁹⁶ “African American” here refers to United-States born individuals descending from persons enslaved within the United States.

form known as Lukumi which formed in Cuba beginning with the arrival of Yoruba people in the 17th came to the orisha tradition by way of Cuban—or Cuban-trained—practitioners and/or forms of practice.¹⁹⁷ As such, amongst US-based practitioners, as in Cuba, the word “obi” typically refers to cut or broken pieces of coconut meat which are used to divine and perform other functions in the way that kola nut is used in Yorubaland. While it has been informally theorized, through sacred stories known as *apataki* in Lukumi, that the Yoruba and their descendants in the Americas chose coconut as a substitute for kola upon arrival in the Americas, therefore constituting a change in orientation, I argue that this practice is continuous with continental practice, as coconut was and is used in Yorubaland to communicate with certain deities. In making a case for this continuity, I will examine the indexical nature of material relationships in Ifa-Oriša, presenting a comparative analysis of Yorubaland kola and Diasporic coco¹⁹⁸ divination and the meanings and uses of these two items in their respective contexts.

As covered in chapter 2, one of the kola nut’s most important roles is that of an interlocutor who is able to relay messages between humans and the deities known as orisha. Through the divination process described in the same chapter whereby the kola nut is opened and its segments dropped to the ground, devotees are able to engage in conversations with the divinities during which they may ascertain the acceptance of their

¹⁹⁷ For a concise history, see Tracey Hucks, “From Cuban Santeria to African Yoruba: Evolutions in African American Oriša History, 1959-1970” in *Oriša Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona, Terry Rey (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 337-354.

¹⁹⁸ Although coconut is known as “obi” in Lukumi practice, to avoid confusion, in this chapter I will refer to the kola nut as “kola” and coconut obi as “coco.” This is consistent with practitioners’ language usage as throwing coconut obi is sometimes referenced as “throwing coco.”

prayers and offerings as well as gain deeper insight into other aspects of their lives. As aforementioned, depending on a practitioner's level of devotion and the number of orisha to which she or he is initiated, she or he may potentially engage in kola nut divination on a daily basis, making it the most quotidian and widely employed of all the Yoruba divination forms. The same holds true in the diaspora where coconut—most often fresh, though the dried outer husk is used in certain circumstances—is the most commonly employed divination medium.

When Yoruba people were cast into diaspora by way of the Transatlantic slave trade beginning in the 16th century, the Ifa-Oriša tradition—including the practice of kola divination—traveled with them across the waters and was transplanted into many new locations, most notably the island of Cuba. Due to the dearth of kola in this new environment, however, orisha devotees were obliged to employ a suitable substitute to stand in its place and perform its most sacred and indispensable duties. The alternative to which they turned was the plentiful *agbon* (coconut) which they opened, cut, and cast in the same manner in which they had formerly thrown the kola nut. Over time and as generations of practitioners were born on Caribbean soil, reference to the kola faded and “obi” came to refer to the cut pieces of coconut—*coco* in their new language, Spanish—which were now used in the kola's place. Other aspects of Ifa-Oriša practice were also adapted to the new environment and amalgamated with Catholicism and European and Native Spiritism, and the entire system came to be referenced under new names like

*Santería, Lucumí, and La Regla de Ocha.*¹⁹⁹ New legends arose, including tales about the coco and how it came to be the mouthpiece of the orisha, and as the practice moved into the United States beginning with the en masse Cuban migration spurred by the Cuban revolution (1953-1959), this designation and use of coco as “obi”—as well as the associated stories—moved with it where it became engrained in the new population of African American practitioners.

Crossing the Waters: The Expansion and Contraction of Kola and Coco

The survival of African religions, in general, and Ifa-Orisha, in particular, through the Middle Passage and the experience of slavery is remarkable. Despite their inability to transport any material items in the holds of the ships, enslaved Africans carried the knowledge of their traditions in their very beings as, rather than being inscribed on pages, the knowledge had been inscribed into their minds and bodies, with their movements and melodies acting as indexes, prompting the recall of the stored information. While kola was, by and large, unable to cross the Atlantic with enslaved Africans, it had already crossed with their captors, having been introduced into Brazil by the Portuguese, and into Trinidad and Jamaica—where it came to be known as “bizzy” or “bissi”—by the

¹⁹⁹ For more detailed information about these transformations, cf. Brown, David, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jacob K. Olupona, and Terry Rey, *Orisha Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Palmié, Stephe, *The Cooking of History: How not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

British.²⁰⁰ The *igi obi* (obi tree) was all but completely absent, however, from the island of Cuba where many Yoruba descendants and their Ifa-Oriṣa religion landed.

The relatively late arrival of Yoruba people into Cuba and Brazil, with most having been brought during the 18th and 19th centuries, coupled with the delayed ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in these two countries—1886 and 1888, respectively, representing the last two abolition dates in the Americas—are frequently cited as the perfect coupling of events which allowed the Ifa-Oriṣa tradition to take strong hold in these locales.²⁰¹ These practices did not remain static, however, they mixed with the Catholicism of the Spanish and Portuguese, the French Spiritism of Allan Kardec, and—to a lesser degree—with the traditions of what was left of the decimated indigenous populations to become, in Albert Raboteau’s words, “unique hybrids of American origin.”²⁰²

In Cuba, these hybrids came to be known as like *Lukumí*, *Santería*—so called because of the Catholic saints whose identities became intertwined with those of the

²⁰⁰ See Cola Nut. (*Cola acuminata*, R. Br.). *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew), Vol. 1890, No. 47 (1890), pp. 253-260. The dating within the article suggests that the kola was introduced into Jamaica in around 1840. A few individuals of Jamaican descent with whom I informally discussed the term “bissi” and how it came about in reference to the kola nut suggested that the term references the caffeine content of the kola and how it is known to keep one “busy” or energetic. It recently came to my attention, however, that this term may in fact come from a verse of the odu Ifa oturupon ofun (referenced on page 79) which speaks about the kola nut and begins with the phrase “oturupon bisi bisi.”

²⁰¹ Cf. David Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁰² Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4.

Yoruba oriša and whose visages practitioners used in worship—and *La Regla de Ocha*, or “the way of the oriša.”²⁰³ These new forms of practice continued to germinate in Cuba through the end of the slave trade and through the early 20th century when they were introduced to African descendants in the United States by way of the intellectual and artistic work of scholar-artists, including the renowned dancer Katherine Dunham, and they continued to grow and propagate more heavily following a wave of immigration into the US after the Cuban revolution.²⁰⁴

Along with new names came new forms of practice and much of the change in forms might be characterized in terms of what Lisa Oşunleti Beckley-Roberts terms expansion and contraction, whereby certain meanings and

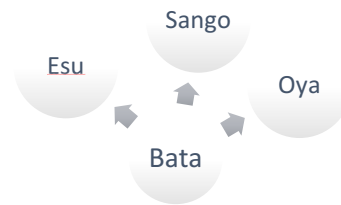


Figure 11: Yorubaland usage of the bata

practices grow and become more widespread than they initially were, while others shrink to become more specific and pointed than they were in their original contexts.²⁰⁵ This

²⁰³ The term *Lukumi* is popularly thought to derive from the word *olùkùmi*, meaning “my friend” in Yoruba language. In addition to referring to Cuban oriša practice, it also refers to the de-intonated dialect of Yoruba used as a liturgical language within the practice. *Ocha* is a Hispanicized rendering of the word *ooşa*, which is an alternate way of saying *oriša*. As Spanish does not contain the “sh” sound denoted by the Yoruba letter “ş,” Hispanicized renderings of Yoruba words often replace the “ş” with “ch” as in *oricha* for *oriša*, *Ochun* for the oriša *Oşun*, and *Chango* for the oriša *Şango*. For more on this see John Mason, *Orin Oriša: Songs for Selected Heads*. New York: Original Publishing, 1992.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Marta Moreno Vega, “The Dynamic Influence of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans in the Growth of Ocha in New York City.” In Jacob Olupona and Terry Rey (Eds.) *Òrişà Devotion as World Religion: the Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*. (Madison, WI.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

²⁰⁵ Lisa Osunleti Beckley-Roberts, “To and Through the Doors of Ocha: Music, Spiritual Transformation, and Reversion Among African American Lucumi” (PhD dissertation, Florida State University, 2016), 5.

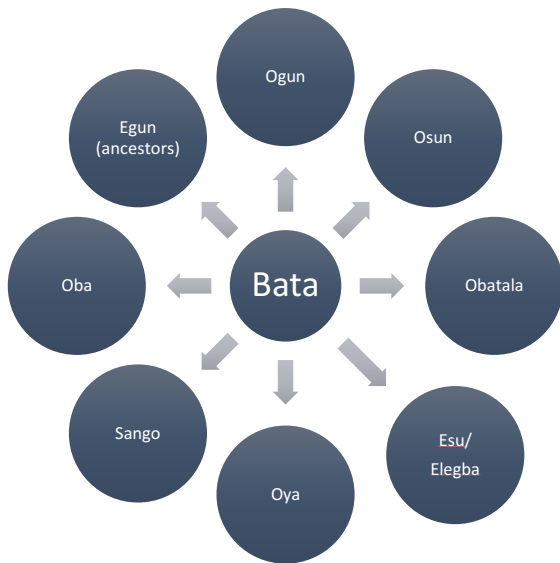


Figure 12: Expanded diasporic usage of the bata

expansion and contraction was enacted in many ways and affected many practices and material culture items, some of which remain to be discovered. Two of the most immediately visible instances involve the expanded use of the drum known as the *bata* and of the coconut. While each of these items formerly indexed

only a few orisha, they have each come to index a much wider variety of spirit groups in their new diasporic home.

In Yorubaland practice, each orisha has their own musical instrument(s) which corresponds to their particular frequency and which serves to summon them into the earthly realm through the phenomenon of spirit possession. Teresa N. Washington cites spirit possession as one of the most important rituals within Ifa-Orisha and many other African traditions because it allows human beings to become the gods, and therefore get closer to their true divine nature, if only temporarily.²⁰⁶ Music is of the utmost importance as it is the means through which the orisha are called down to earth and Wande Abimbola notes that there were once as many as 900 musical instruments in the Yoruba

²⁰⁶Teresa Washington, *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence: Divinity in Africana Life, Lyrics, and Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Oya's Tornado, 2014), 17.

repertoire, many of which have been lost over time.²⁰⁷ The double-headed *bata* drum is one of the instruments that has withstood the test of time and circumstance, crossing the water into the diaspora and taking on a new, expanded use. Whereas in Yorubaland this particular drum is sacred to the oriṣa Eṣu,²⁰⁸ Ṣango, and Oya, in diasporic practice the *bata* has come to be the primary instrument used in sacred ceremonies for all the oriṣa replacing instruments like the *igbin*, sacred to Obatala, the *ipese*, sacred to Orunmila, and the *ogidan*, sacred to Ogun.²⁰⁹ In a similar fashion, due to the dearth of the kola nut—and other materials like the *orogbo* (bitter kola) which were also used to appease particular spirits—in the Americas, the use of the coconut also expanded to fulfill some the kola nut's most important functions including becoming the most widely used in divination medium amongst diasporic Ifa-Oriṣa practitioners.

²⁰⁷ Wande Abimbola, Keynote address, Oṣoni of Ifẹ̀ Òjájá II Symposium on Culture, Healing, and Development, June 16, 2016, Howard University, Washington, DC.

²⁰⁸ Though the *bata* has come to be most heavily associated with Sango, Adgebite notes that it was first sacred to Eṣu before being adopted by Sango devotees. For more on Yoruba drums and their religious usages, see Ademola Adegbite, "The Drum and Its Role in Yoruba Religion." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 18, Fasc. 1 (Feb., 1988), pp. 15-26. Bascom (1956) also suggests that the *bata* may also have been used for other deities.

²⁰⁹ It is noteworthy that not all oriṣa from Yorubaland transferred into the Americas. While it is oft-noted that there exist 400 + 1 oriṣa, each of which corresponded to a different town and/or natural phenomenon, like the oriṣa Oṣun who is the deity of the Oṣun river and the patron of the town of Oṣogbo, only about 15 of them are regularly included in New World oriṣa worship. Diagrams are meant to be demonstrative rather than exhaustive.

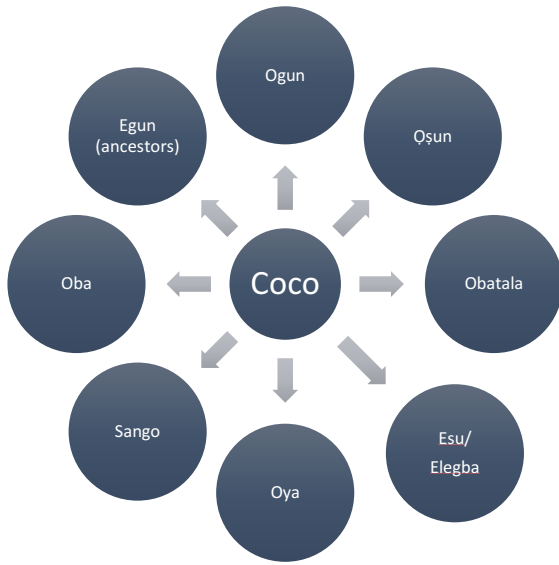


Figure 13: Expanded diaspora usage of the coconut

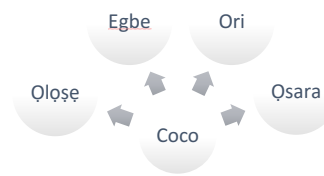


Figure 14: Yorubaland usage of the coconut

Continental Coco: The Coconut in Yorubaland

The coconut (*cocos nucifera*)—which, like the kola, is not truly a nut but a seed—is theorized to have originated in Southeast Asia and have since become endemic to many coastal, tropical regions of the world including the west African coast and the Caribbean. They are known as “drift fruits” as, like the African captives who survived the journey across the Atlantic and planted their cultural seeds on arrival on new shores, coconuts are believed to have made their spread around the world—at least in part—by floating on the ocean, having the ability to withstand up to 110 days at sea and traverse approximately 3,000 miles without losing their ability to propagate into new trees.²¹⁰ Like many fruits,

²¹⁰ Charles Howard Edmonson, “Viability of Coconut Seeds After Floating in Sea.” Bernice P. Bishop Museum Occasional Papers (Vol.16, No.12: December 1941), 303. This theory of float distribution has been questioned, but is still generally accepted though humans certainly also helped to propagate the coconut.

vegetables, and legumes including white yam, beans, and peanuts, coconuts have been used as offerings to the orisha in Yorubaland for as long as the tradition has been practiced, and several verses of Ifa make reference to the coconut and its value to various spirits.

One example is cited in William Bascom’s classic text, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*, where he notes that there was an annual *Odun Agbon* (coconut festival) being held in Mọre, a town on the Easternmost point of what is now Ogun state, Nigeria. This festival was in honor of two orisha—Oşara and Oloşẹ—to whom the coconut is held sacred, and a verse of the odu Ifa oyeku meji refers to the practice of “tying coconut,” or creating ankle rattles out of coconut leaves and pebbles, during this festival:

*Nigba ti Olasumogbe nwa omọ ti ko ri
 O to awon babalawo lo
 Nwon so fun yio bi omọ
 Sugbon ki o ni rubo ati pelu pe ni oju re ni
 omọ naa yio se je oye
 Ko lojo, losu, Olasumogbe loyun o si bi omọ
 okunrin kan
 Nigbati o dagba nwon si fi je oye Oloşara
 Ni ojo ti o nlo gboye, ojo bere si ro
 Ofẹ ya ki iya re sugbon ojo ko je ki o ya o si
 bere si ro o si nku “giri” o si bere si korin
 pe:
 “Olasumogbe me mo le ya
 Agbeji moba ojo de”
 Lati ojo naa ni awon ara Mọre maa n korin
 yii nigbati nwon lo di agbon ti nwon ba si
 njo*

At the time when Olasumogbe wanted a child but was not getting pregnant
 She went to see the babalawo and they told her that
 she would have a child but that she needed to offer sacrifice and that she would one day see the child given a title
 In a short time, she became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy
 When he got older, they came to give him the title of chief priest of Oşara
 On the day that he was going to take the title it began to rain
 He wanted to turn and greet his mother but the rain did not allow him to turn, it began to fall with the sound “giri” and he began to sing:
 “Olasumogbe I cannot turn

One-who-dwells-in-the-thunderstorm-knows-the-king²¹¹ the rain has arrived”

Since that day, the people of Mòrẹ have sung this song whenever they tie the coconut and dance²¹²

This verse, which Bascom recorded in the 1950s documents the use of the coconut and its leaves in Yorubaland and also brings attention to two oriṣa who have been lost to the diaspora, Ọṣara and Ọlọṣẹ. Although no particular reference is made to using the coconut for divination in this verse, it does point to the fact that coconut holds provenance as a part of the flora sacred to the oriṣa in Yorubaland practice.

My own observations and conversations with priests in Yorubaland corroborate the coconut’s use for two oriṣa in particular, *ori* and *ẹgbẹ*. Ifa priest and Araba Elebuibon notes coconut as an offering for ori.²¹³ Due, perhaps, to its resemblance to the human head, the coconut was and is used to appease the *ori inu*, or the inner head, which is the unique personal deity of each individual human. It is said that every human being is born with ori, which the odu ogunda owonrin notes as a part of *isese*, or a person’s “medicines” and keepers of tradition, and further that no oriṣa can bless a human without the sanction of his or her ori. As such, ori plays a crucial role in Ifa-Oriṣa cosmology. Philosophically, the ori represents an individual’s conscience and inner moral compass, which each person possesses regardless of levels of initiation or lack thereof. The term

²¹¹ This is a person’s name.

²¹² Bascom, *Ifa*, 235.

²¹³ Elebuibon, *The Adventures of Obatala*, 146.

ori inu has dual meaning and significance in that *inu* is also the Yoruba term for the stomach and aside from the head, *ori* is said to reside also in the stomach which is why people often feel a flutter in the stomach or other abdominal symptoms when engaged in immoral acts. It is not only the head that knows, but also the “gut” and this is because *ori* resides in both these locales. For this reason, during ceremonies aimed at appeasing the *ori*, including the head rogation mentioned in the opening vignette, a bit of the cooling mixture or sacrificial offering is placed in the belly button in addition to being applied to the head.

The worship of *ori* and the initiation ceremony meant to align one’s inner head (*ori inu*) with the outer head (*ori ode*) was uncommon in the Americas until it was reintroduced by renewed contact with west African *oriṣa* practitioners over the last approximately two decades. During this ceremony, the initiate receives an icon representing the *ori* which is generally composed of cowry shells bound with leather and this icon, like those of the other *oriṣa*, is placed on the initiate’s altar. The initiate then periodically engages in an offering known as *ibori*, during which offerings are made to his or her physical head as well as to the icon; coconut is frequently included in these offerings. Although the reception of the icon representing *ori* was not carried into the diaspora, *ori*’s centrality remained and the head rogation ceremony arose in place of the traditional *ibori*.

While the offerings made during *ibori* varied, the mixture employed in a rogation ceremony is generally constant with coconut comprising the majority of the concoction. Germane to this discussion, during several *ibori* ceremonies performed in the town of Oṣogbo in the summer of 2013, I witnessed broken pieces of coconut being used in place

of the kola nut to divine the orisha's satisfaction with the offerings. Though it is difficult to be sure how far back this practice dates and whether it is employed outside of Oṣogbo, when I inquired about it I was advised by the priestess performing the rituals that the practice of using coconut during divination for ori had been passed on to her by her teachers and was not a personal innovation.

Another spiritual force to whom the coconut is held sacred and for whom I witnessed coconut used in divination practice is the group of spirits known as *ẹgbẹ*. Like the reception of the icon of ori, *ẹgbẹ* icons and their reception during initiation ceremonies has been largely absent from New World practice. As every human being is said to have an ori, before becoming incarnated in flesh, every person is also said to have belonged to a group of comrades in the spiritual realm; these heavenly companions comprise an individual's *ẹgbẹ*. Playful and childlike spirits similar to the twin spirits known as *ibeji*, the *ẹgbẹ* can bless an individual immensely or disrupt her or his life if they feel they are not being sufficiently placated. The coconut, with its fresh water and smooth, white flesh acts as a cooling agent for these sometimes-hot spirits and, pertinent to the present discussion, I witnessed the flesh of the coconut is often broken and casted in the same manner as kola in order to communicate with *ẹgbẹ* and ascertain their pleasure—or lack thereof—with the offerings and prayers presented to them. In addition to coconut, peanuts and sugar cane are common offerings to *ẹgbẹ* and these, too, may be used to divine the *ẹgbẹ*'s satisfaction with offerings. While more research is required on the subject, this observation indicates the existence of the practice of coconut divination in Yorubaland and supports my assertion that coconut divination should be viewed as an expanded continuity rather than a diasporic innovation.

From Kola to Coco: Change and Continuity

Despite the evidence of the coconut's use as an offering and divination tool in Yorubaland, the most common narratives around the way in which it came to be used in Cuba and, subsequently, in the United States posits coco divination as a new world invention. For example, Ifayemi Elebuibon references the use of coconut in place of kola nut as a "New World transformation"²¹⁴ and, based on data mined from *libretas de santo* (lit. saints notebooks) *oloriṣa* and scholar Miguel "Willie" Ramos suggests that the coco divination system was "born" in Cuba sometime before the nineteenth century, as of these turn-of-the-century documents reference it.²¹⁵ The fact Stories, known in Cuba and the US as *apataki*,²¹⁶ of Caribbean origin came to explain the coconut's use, the most famous of which I recount here:

The coconut had always been a being of upstanding character.

One day, in recognition of this fact, Olodumare decided to exalt the coconut by giving it an immortal soul and placing it high in the palm tree where it would be difficult to reach. While the coconut continued to behave well for a time, eventually the reality of having been elevated by Olodumare began to go to its head and it became arrogant. Elegba, who watches all and is charged with the task of helping to keep all of the beings

²¹⁴ Ifayemi Elebuibon, *The Adventures of Obatala, Vol. 1* (Revised edition) (Osogbo, Nigeria: The Ancient Philosophy International, 2016), 17.

²¹⁵ Miguel Willie Ramos, *Obí Agbón: Lukumí Divination with Coconut* (Miguel "Willie" Ramos, 2012), 2.

²¹⁶ The literal translation of *apataki* is "that which is important" and it refers to the sacred narratives of Lukumi. In Yorubaland practice, the word *itan*, meaning story or history, is used.

created by Olodumare serving the highest good, noticed the coconut's growing haughtiness and decided to put it to the test.²¹⁷

The perfect opportunity presented itself when the coconut began planning a party at its home in the palm tree and asked Elegba for his help in inviting people. In addition to the coconut's friends, Elegba invited all the beggars he could find and instructed them to make sure they were extra dirty and smelly when they came to the party. On the day of the event, the coconut supplied plenty of food and drinks and welcomed its friends happily. The party was going on without a hitch when the beggars began to arrive. Upon seeing these dirty and smelly individuals entering its pristine home, the coconut began to shout, "Who are these filthy people? Get them out of my house now! Can you not see that they are dirty and smelly? Get them out now!" The coconut forced the beggars to leave without so much as offering them a plate of food to take along. Elegba, who was watching as always, was horrified.

"I knew it!" He shouted at the coconut, "You have become completely arrogant and proud. You do not deserve the honor that Olodumare has bestowed upon you and I'm going to report you!"

Despite the coconut's pleas and apologies, Elegba sped off and went straight to Olodumare's home where he recounted all that had happened. Olodumare couldn't believe what was being said.

²¹⁷ Elegba is a praise name of the oriṣa Eṣu and is the name more commonly used to refer to Eṣu in the diaspora.

“The coconut? The one who always had the best character of all my creations? Arrogant? Denying beggars food?” Olodumare asked incredulous, “I don’t believe this, I will have to go and see for myself.”

The next day, Olodumare went to the coconut’s house disguised as one of the beggars who had been ejected from the party the previous day. Upon opening the door, the coconut exasperatedly barked, “You again! Did I not tell you to leave yesterday? Can you not see that you are dirty and stinking and you dare come to my house? Me! The chosen one of Olodumare! Leave my face and bathe yourself before you ever think of coming to my door again!” With that, the coconut slammed the door.

Olodumare was shocked! The things Elegba had said were true! Olodumare used their power to fling the door back open and, at the same time, they dropped their disguise and revealed their true identity.

“Olodumare!” stammered the coconut, in awe, dropping to the floor in prostration. “I didn’t know it was you! I’m so sorry, please forgive me!”

“Whether toward me or anyone, your behavior is completely unacceptable!” chided Olodumare. “Elegba had told me you changed, but I didn’t realize it had gone this far. Because you failed to help and serve, your whole life will now be one of service. Your job, from now on, will be to report the messages of the orisha. But you will no

longer have a tongue with which to do speak, you will speak by throwing yourself to the floor in humble prostration before anyone who wishes to speak with the orisha.”²¹⁸

The coconut shook and trembled. He opened his mouth to protest but found that Olodumare had already taken his tongue. Resigned to his fate, the coconut was truly remorseful. He vowed to be the best messenger he could be and to report faithfully to humanity whatever the orisha conveyed to him.



In this story, several points of similarity with the story of the kola, recounted in chapter 3, come to the fore. Like the kola, the coconut was relegated to the service of the other orisha because of wrongdoing; in the case of kola the transgression was infidelity while in the case of coco, it was haughtiness and a lack of humility. As well, both the kola and the coconut vow to faithfully report the edicts of the orisha and, it can be assumed due to their widespread use by all of the various orisha groups, they both come to gain the spirits’ trust. One major difference in the story, however, concerns the gender of the messenger: while kola is a female spirit, coco is decidedly male. I have, thus far, been unable to glean whether the coconut was considered a female in Yorubaland, but its designation as male in the Americas aligns it with the orisha Eṣu—Elegba, as he is more commonly called in the diaspora—who is male and with whom new initiates into diasporic orisha practice first learn to communicate using the coconut.

²¹⁸ Within this story, I used the common diasporic spelling of orisha. Versions of this story appear in both *Obi Agbon: Lukumi Divination with Coconut* by Miguel “Willie” Ramos and *Obi: Oracle of Cuban Santeria* by Ocha Ni’ Lele.

Noteworthy, as well, is the fact that the coconut loses his tongue and thus the ability to speak on his own behalf in the process of becoming the mouthpiece of the orisha. Though he is silenced in one sense, no longer having the ability to speak on his own behalf, he gains the ability to translate the messages of the orisha to human beings which is an indispensable duty that only an exalted few can fulfill. Facilitating communication between the orisha and humans is a primary duty of both the kola and the coco and both are indispensable in this role. As most every ritual within Yorubaland orisha practice utilizes the kola, most every ritual within diasporic practice utilizes the coco; both report the orisha's satisfaction or displeasure with the ritual offerings, answer inquires from the practitioner, and help assess whether the spirits require additional materials, prayers, or other attention in order to pronounce the ritual *boda* (completed, done well).



Figure 15: Coconut obi showing the sign of ejife
(photograph by Dr. Lisa Osunleti Beckley-Roberts, used with permission)

Similarities and differences, both physical and metaphysical, may be noted with regard to the coco and the kola as they are employed. First, while the kola is naturally segmented, easily accommodating the opening and casting of its pieces, the coconut—encased as it is in a hard husk—must first be broken and its meat cut into four pieces to facilitate its use for divination. As anyone who has opened and cut a coco into obi can attest, this makes for labor-intensive preparation. Because of this, and also because of the dearth of coconuts in some urban locales where coconut obi is used, whereas each kola nut is used only once, practitioners commonly use coconut obi more than once, often keeping the obi in a bowl of water in the refrigerator in between uses.²¹⁹ As such, while the lifespan of a kola nut, once chosen for divination, is typically only a few minutes, and it may only be activated once, the life of coconut obi may be extend for days as the pieces are reactivated and reused.

Another major physical difference between the kola and the coco concerns the gendered aspects of kola as discussed in chapter 3. As noted, the *iya obi*—which consists of four lobes, two male and two female—is the type of kola most commonly used for divination. Whereas the pieces of kola are naturally marked as male and female, making the casting somewhat analogous to sexual reproduction, the coconut carries no such distinction.²²⁰ The fact that coconut obi are typically cut from a single coconut eliminates

²¹⁹ The practice of reusing obi is sometimes frowned upon and practitioners typically insist on freshly-prepared obi for public or semi-public ceremonies. During private, individual practice, however, previously-prepared and refrigerated obi are commonly used. I have directly observed this practice in the homes of at least three African American practitioners in New York and Florida.

²²⁰ Babalawo Oluwole Ifakunle Adetutu Alagbede has suggested that there are, in fact, male and female coconuts and that, ideally, coconut obi would be formed using two pieces from a male coconut and two pieces from a female coconut. Although I have never witnessed anyone do this in practice, he was able to

the gender balance embodied by the four-lobed kola.²²¹ In fact, as the coconut is seen as a male entity in the Americas, the energy of coco divination is, it seems, skewed toward the masculine, much like the aforementioned eta obi. This masculine character is further supported by the fact that the first three divinities for whom oriša devotees learn to divine—Elegba, Ogun, and Osun²²²—are male. Despite this seeming lack of balance, however, because the coconut obi are cut from the same coconut, they still represent a unified whole capable of delivering a complete, singular message. As well, the fact that four pieces are always employed means that all five basic signatures may be obtained.

Related to the issue of gender, it is of note as well is that there are some small restrictions for women within coco divination that do not exist with the use of kola. One such restriction comes into play when obi is being used to communicate with the ancestors. It is commonly taught that women who are of childbearing age should not see the coco fall when using it to communicate with these spirits as it could render them barren. As such, if a male priest is conducting the divination, the women present are directed to turn their backs just before the coco is thrown or, if the woman is conducting the divination herself, she is instructed to turn her back and cast the coco over her

point out anatomical differences in those coconuts that would be considered male verses those considered female.

²²¹ Some practitioners I spoke with sought to mitigate this by using two bilobed kola (obi nitida) in a single divination. I was advised, however that despite the reduction in signatures, it is still preferable to use one kola nut at a time as each is whole and complete on its own and using two combines the energy of two individuals which may skew the reading.

²²² Not to be confused with Oṣun.

shoulder such that she does not see the pieces hit the floor.²²³ Although I have not witnessed this practice with regard to kola, it is noteworthy that the rituals surrounding *egungun*, or ancestral spirits, as well as those of *oro*, are typically considered male affairs. As such, there were traditionally restrictions on women's movement during these rites and, in the case of *oro*, women were forbidden to see its sacred objects. Though the rites for *egungun* and *oro* are largely absent from diasporic practice, the restrictions may have been reborn in the diaspora as a ban on women seeing the coco fall for the ancestors.

Another practice that seems reborn in the diaspora is the “picking” of the coconut obi. As noted in chapter 2, the “eyes” of the kola are plucked out during its preparation for use and these are offered to the *oriṣa* separately as a precursor to the offering of the kola itself. While coco has no such eyes, in a seeming nod to their extraction from the kola, diviners making use of coco pick small bits from around the edges of each the four pieces of coconut as they utter the standard *ijuba* (paying of homage, prayer) which is recited before the casting of coco. These small bits are then placed before the *oriṣa* who will speak through the obi along with pronouncements against the most common *ajogun* or warlords against life. Upon dropping these picked bits, the practitioner states: “Ko si iku, ko si arun, ko si ofo” (let there be no death, let there be no sickness, let there be no loss) beseeching the coco not to announce any of these calamities during the course of the reading. This hearkens to the statement that “Iku

²²³ Ocha'ni Lele, 52. I have also received this explanation when witnessing and participating in this practice.

ki pa obi kii pa oju” (the death that kills the obi does not kill the eyes) which references the continuity of life even in the face of death and which is expressed upon extracting the eyes from the kola.

The Voice of the Coco

The most important aspect of both coco and kola is their “voice” or the signatures through which they speak when they are thrown and additional points of continuity and change may be noted with regard to these signatures.²²⁴ Ocha Ni’ Lele’s *Obi: Oracle of Cuban Santeria* and Miguel “Willie” Ramos’ *Obi Agbon: Lukumi Divination with Coconut*, (Miguel “Willie” Ramos, 2012) both offer highly detailed descriptions of the mechanics of coconut obi divination. I will not aim to offer a comprehensive rendering here, but will highlight just a few points of convergence and divergence. One important divergence is that when throwing kola to the oriṣa, the kola itself is the primary sacrament being offered to the oriṣa and the first throw of the kola is intended to assess whether the oriṣa will accept the offering without further comment. As aforementioned, if *obi yan* (○○●●) on the first throw, the offering has been accepted. If any other signature falls, however, the oriṣa seek to deliver a message, and the diviner will launch into subsequent inquiries about the nature of the message. In contrast, coco is not, itself, being offered to the oriṣa during a coco divination. Instead, the questions typically center

²²⁴ Ocha Ni’ Lele, *Obi: Oracle of Cuban Santeria* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2001); Miguel “Willie” Ramos’ *Obi Agbon: Lukumi Divination with Coconut*, (Miguel “Willie” Ramos, 2012).

on either the ritual environment (whether a particular ritual may commence or continue) or the acceptability of other sacrificial items being offered to the orisha. As such, the divine reflexivity above noted regarding kola divination is not duplicated with coco.

The signatures of coco themselves display both similarity to and difference from those of kola. While most of the coco signatures retain their original names, or ones similar, to those of the kola a few of the names change as does their meaning (Figures 16 and 1). With coco, as with kola, the most perfect and balanced affirmative answer the obi can render is comprised of two segments showing their light faces (“up”) while two show dark (“down”). While in Yorubaland this signature referred to as yan or *ejire*, in Lukumi practice this sign is called *ejife*, which has been translated as “two loves” or “two to Ife,” and is, perhaps a transformation of *ejire*, meaning two “two in ire.”²²⁵ When this signature falls during the course of a coco reading, it is interpreted as a “yes” or confirmation of the question asked and it is not necessary to throw again regarding the same inquiry.

The sign *alaafia*, meaning “peace” in Yoruba, which consists of all four pieces of coco facing upward, has the connotation of light and blessings when applied to coco. Though regarded as a positive sign, the practitioner still throws a second time to confirm the positive message heralded by the appearance of *alaafia*. As too much light can be as blinding as darkness, this sign is considered unbalanced and is still viewed with some suspicion until confirmed by a subsequent throw. The signatures *itawa* and *okanna* are

²²⁵ This has also been cited by some sources as sanding for “two friends” (*ore meji*) but two in ire makes more sense in the context of divination.

similarly considered unbalanced, representing light with a small shadow of darkness and darkness with a small shadow of light, respectively. As such, these also require subsequent throws to confirm their messages.

SIGNATURE	KOLA	COCO
○○●●	Yan / Ejire	Ejife
○○○○	Alaafia	Alaafia
●●●●	Isegun	Oyeku
○○○●	Iwa	Itagwa / Itawa
●●●○	Okan	Okanran / Okanna

Figure 16: Comparison of Kola and Coco Signature Names

An important point of continuity even in the midst of change concerns the kinesthetically enacted and visually received aspects of coco divination, two of which I will highlight. The first regards the coco sign of *oyeku* (●●●●), which corresponds to the kola sign, *isegun*. When reading kola, if the first throw is *isegun*, the kola will be asked if it is victory that is indicated. If the subsequent throw is *yan*, the answer is yes and the kola would then be broken using a rock or stick as a kinesthetic enactment of the victory. A second obi would then typically be cast to affirm the message. In a similar vein, when the coco is thrown and *oyeku* falls, the pieces of the coco are to be destroyed as well however in this case it indicates the breaking of death and the side-stepping of death as indicated by the term *oyeku*. The broken pieces of obi are then customarily

tossed into the street to signify the dismissal of the energy of death from the space of the reading.²²⁶ The reading is then continued with a new set of obi.

The second point of kinesthetic continuity involves the introduction of the obi to the oriṣa and the temporary bundling of aṣẹ facilitated by way of physical contact.²²⁷ As with kola, coco is charged with the aṣẹ of both the practitioner and the oriṣa with whom the coco will facilitate communication first by touching the pieces of coco to the practitioner's body and then to the implements of the oriṣa. Following this, the oriṣa who will speak through the coco is called forth using the same motions indicated for kola. As with kola, the earth—on which the coco will land when thrown—will bear witness to the revealed messages, so the practitioner greets the earth by touching the ground with the fingers of the right hand, and then slapping the fist of the left hand with an open palm, such that the impact is percussive, while calling out in greeting. Whereas the greeting used with kola employs the verb *pe* (to call), the Lukumi greeting uses the verb *ki* (to greet), making the phrase “*Ile mo ki o*” (Earth, I greet you) rather than “*Ile mo pe o*” (Earth, I call you) as used with kola. A parallel shift takes place with the subsequent greeting of the oriṣa, which engages the same motion and the same verb shift.

²²⁶ Although this is cited as the customary treatment when oyeku falls, as I have observed, practitioners often refrain from breaking the obi as prescribed. This I believe, is due to the difficulty of procuring coconuts, particularly in urban areas. During one ceremony that took place in March 2017, for example, I witnessed a practitioner buy no less than ten coconuts, all of which turned out to be rotten upon opening them. He then returned to the store and bought four more, and two of these were also rotten inside.

²²⁷ See page 80.

KOLA	COCO
Picking out the “eyes” of the obi	Picking around the edges of the piece of coconut
Kola is touched to the body of the practitioner and the implements of the oriṣa to facilitate a “temporary bundling” of aṣẹ	Coco is touched to the body of the practitioner and the implements of the oriṣa to facilitate a “temporary bundling” of aṣẹ
Only <i>ejire</i> (yan) is read as affirmative answer	<i>Ejife</i> (yan) is immediate affirmative; <i>alaafia</i> , and <i>itagwa</i> may be read as affirmative depending on the subsequent throw
Four down is read as <i>isegun</i> meaning “victory”	Four down is read as <i>oyeku</i> meaning “side-step death”
Obi are broken when all four lobes face down	Obi are broken when all four pieces face down

Figure 17: Analogous actions in the use of kola and coco

I note these continuities to further highlight the importance of kinesthetic epistemologies within kola divination. The fact that physical actions, in particular, remained consistent over time even when the reasons for their enactment and accompanying utterances were lost or changed, speaks to the power of kinesthetic knowledge, how deeply it is embedded, and how efficiently it is propagated. This is more evidence to support the inclusion of this vital epistemological mode in discussions of ifa-Oriṣa, as reducing it to orality alone, is to miss a key axis of analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored some of the differences and similarities between divination using kola nut and coconut demonstrate the change and continuity between the

two systems. As I have shown, there is evidence for the performance of the use of coconut, including as a divinatory tool, in Yorubaland refuting the assertion that it is purely a diasporic invention, as is commonly held. Rather, the practice expanded in use and became domesticated in the new environment, which included a shift in some of the meanings accompanied by a remarkable continuity in the kinesthetic aspects of practice.

As so much of this knowledge was embodied rather than recorded in writing, it may not be possible to trace the moment at which these shifts took place. What is clear and most remarkable to me, however, is how very consistent the practice remained even in the midst of these changes. Even more than words and meanings, the continuity is evident in the physical practices bathing in water, “picking” the obi, touching the obi to cardinal points on the body, introducing the obi to the oriṣa, and breaking the pieces of obi when they fall face down, whether to embody victory or to enact the death that is being forewarned and sidestepped.

CONCLUSION

A story from the odu Ifa ogunda owonrin tells of a man for whom alcohol and tobacco were a taboo and who was warned not to indulge in drinking or smoking. There came a time at which an elephant was ravaging the man's village and he and the other men of the village tried everything to stop the elephant's rampages, to no avail. The man went to visit a babalawo for divination to find out what, if anything, he could do to stop the incursion and, as it turned out, the babalawo advised him to place a mixture of alcohol and tobacco—the very items the man had been warned against consuming himself—around the perimeter of the village. Much to the delight of the villagers, the mixture worked and the elephant finally left them in peace. As in many other stories and verses of Ifa, the man began to praise his babalawo for the timely and accurate advice and the babalawo, in turn, praised Orunmila, the keeper of wisdom and the Ifa divination system through which the directive had been gleaned.

During my training as an *Oloriṣa* (oriṣa priestess) and *Iyanifa* (Ifa priestess) my master-teacher relayed this story to me as an illustration of the concept that what is prohibited in one context may be curative in another. In particular, the story highlights the fact that one's own taboos may, in fact, end up being one's medicine; the prohibition, therefore, serves as a means to prevent desensitization to the given substance, to avoid building a resistance to it so that it will work when the appointed time arrives. That obi was first introduced to me as my taboo and that she would become the conduit through which I would examine and express the preceding ideas brought this story and its lessons to mind. As any Ifa-Oriṣa practitioner will likely agree, when a particular object becomes

a taboo, it is brought closer to one's consciousness even in seeking to avoid it as one must consistently inquire as to its presence, invoking it, in order to ensure that no unintentional transgression takes place. This has been particularly true with obi, an object which I have almost daily contact, despite its designation as my taboo. On some level, the fact that I am prohibited from ingesting it, has helped me to lean more heavily on the entity portion of obi's object-entity designation. As obi has never been and will never be food to me, my sense of her divinity has been heightened since our first contact and this caused me to focus on her in a different way than I might have otherwise. She has been a steady companion to me throughout the dissertation process and, in the course of our regular interactions, she has delivered some of the most important and timely messages—both of blessing and warning—I have ever received. I am grateful to her as both a scholar and a practitioner for being a conduit through which I have been able to examine intellectual ideas as well as my own life.

As I have aimed to show throughout this dissertation, in both essence and usage, obi embodies and enacts some of the most central concepts within Ifa-Oriṣa religio-philosophy including integrated duality, divine feminine power, and concern with the most immediate, existential realities of life. Each day, at temples and home shrines from Ibadan, Nigeria to Brooklyn, New York, obi gives her very life to guide human beings along their own life paths; without associated stories or verses, she helps humans attend to the most quotidian aspects of life by facilitating intimate, personal relationships between people and the oriṣa who they serve and who, in turn, serve them.

In addition to highlighting obi, specifically, I have also aimed, more generally, to

engage in what Lewis Gordon calls “epistemic resistance”²²⁸ whereby I have reconsidered some of the concepts that have been underpinning the study of African religions and the study of religion more broadly. In so doing, I seek to join the conversation began by Dianne Stewart and Tracey Hucks in which they ask how the emerging field of Africana Religious Studies (ARS) will address the theoretical and methodological inadequacies of the disciplines in which Africana religions have historically been studied and suggest that problem-centered transdisciplinary methodology is one of the keys to remedying these inadequacies.²²⁹ Of the transdisciplinary scholar, Stewart and Hucks note that she “transgresses all relevant disciplinary boundaries to interlace varied tools, methods, frameworks, and datasets in pursuit of a research problem.”²³⁰ Although it may seem that the demarcation between the transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship is merely a semantic one, Stewart and Hucks note, while interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholars “lean toward transdisciplinarity” their approaches are still often injuriously bounded by the questions central to the ossified disciplines—to use Lewis Gordon’s term—within which they work, even when multiple disciplines are being employed.²³¹

Philosophy of religion is one of the disciplines whose boundaries I have sought to

²²⁸ Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, 69.

²²⁹ Dianne M. Stewart Diakit , and Tracey E. Hucks. “Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field.” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013), 30.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, 39.

²³¹ *Ibid*.

push in this work. My elucidation of the *integrated duality* embedded within Ifa-Oriṣa religio-philosophical thought has many implications for the study of this and other cosmologically similar African religions as I intend it makes several theoretical moves. The most important of these is that integrated duality rests on the supposition of a single, neutral, universal energetic force or Supreme Being in contrast to the benevolent Supreme Being (“God”) generally placed at the center of theological considerations. It therefore de-centers the notions of separate sources of “good” and “evil” in favor of a constructive-destructive dialectic that, effectively, renders some of the classical questions in the philosophy of religion—most notably the classic question of the “problem of evil”—unproductive, if not moot, in the context of this and similar traditions. Addressing this point may move toward the elucidation of an indigenous theodicy, or toward the negation of theodicy as a category of inquiry in this religious context, which allows room for more pertinent questions to arise and to be subjected to analysis. Through future work, I would like to push these boundaries even further and contribute to the continued cultivation of philosophy of African/a religions.

Second, while the experiential is a crucial point of articulation, interpreting the frameworks on which the flesh of experience rests and demonstrating the ways in which these frameworks stand to reason is also key. Ethnography and anthropology have played and continue to play a central role in the study of Africana religions due, in part, to a significant bias which, as Jacob Olupona notes, has resulted in indigenous religions being

“speciously cut off” from the study of religion.²³² As such, it may be argued that the experiential—thus, the most readily observable and the most articulable with other social phenomena—has been heavily foregrounded, often leaving philosophical aspects to the background. Lewis Gordon and Robin Horton have both offered critiques of the tendency to exclude Africana *ideas* from philosophical discussions with Gordon noting the inclination to focus on Africana individuals as objects without giving due deference to their ideas, while Horton observes the continued placement of African ideas into the category of “folk” thought which has led to a failure to fully recognize their analytical value and implications. As I seek to highlight and analyze a central philosophical truth buttressing Ifa-Orisha religious practice, it was important for me to engage with my interlocutors not only as subjects, but also—and primarily—as producers of knowledge taking cues most directly from the work of Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo.²³³ While in this work my interlocutors’ voices are largely distilled through my own, and somewhat intentionally so, in future work I look forward to engaging more deeply with their voices as well as presenting more of the orature they shared with me during the course of my fieldwork.

Taking a cue from Michele Moody-Adams, I also question the ways in which scientific methodology has been lauded as the only means through which to assess truth

²³² Jacob Olupona. *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), xiv.

²³³ Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

claims.²³⁴ While Post-Enlightenment thought tends to draw a deep line in the sand between religion and science, Ahmed Ragab has pointed out that this has not always been the case. Both religion and science, he notes, rely on the same epistemic system that calls for the identification of who should—and can—have what knowledge, the methods by which that knowledge should be obtained, and what it is that should be known. He continues by noting that the current answers to these questions have been informed and codified in terms that have injuriously narrowed the field of knowledge by creating a hierarchy that accepts certain types of knowledge as a part of the epistemic field and rejects others as objects that do not belong.²³⁵ Knowledge produced in Europe, North America, and at times Asia is deemed legitimate, whereas knowledge produced in Africa and its diaspora has by and large been excluded. In addition, biological knowledge is an accepted part of the field, whereas esoteric knowledge has overwhelmingly been tossed into the reject pile. Through excavation of this pile and reintegration of some items heretofore discarded, I aim to assist in productively broadening—or re-broadening, as the case may be—the epistemic field and reintegrating religion and science.

One part of doing this is taking seriously the ways in which divination and ritual fit into Africana epistemologies and healing practices, as well as the meanings of health

²³⁴ Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

²³⁵Ragab, Ahmed. “‘Disciplining and Persuading’: Science, Religion, and the Making of Knowledge.” Delivered March 29, 2012. Harvard Divinity School.

and disease. As I have noted elsewhere,²³⁶ in Ifa-Oriṣa, as in many Africana world-senses, balance is considered the norm; imbalance, or “disease” as it is often known when it takes physical form, is indicative of a rupture between the materials and energies that comprise our bodies and our world. Of this, Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani says: “Affliction, whether personal or communal, symbolizes a negation of natural principles. It symbolizes a breakdown, an interruption, or a termination of the normal relationship patterns...”²³⁷ The act of divination is aimed at identifying the location and cause of these breakdowns and, when possible, to prescribing restorative measures through which the individual may repair these ruptures and regain balance. Once a diagnosis is made through divination, ritual serves as the key to unlock the potential for change—or the rudder to assist the client in staying the proper course if change is deemed unnecessary or inadvisable. For this reason, regular consultation with the oriṣa using obi, as well as other divination tools, plays a central role not only in the religious life of Ifa-Oriṣa practitioners, but also in their social lives, including their healthcare practices. For instance, in several cases throughout my fieldwork, I observed oriṣa, by way of obi, announce circumstances such as pregnancies, impending illnesses, impending deaths, and other important life circumstances. As the most commonly employed divination medium, and one that does not require initiation or years of learning to utilize, obi plays an even more central role in the social lives of practitioners than the more frequently studied

²³⁶ Funlayo E. Wood, “Sacred Healing and Wholeness in Africa and the Americas.” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 3 (2013), 378.

²³⁷ Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani, “Pa Divination: Ritual Performance and Symbolism among the Ngas, Mupun, and Mwaghavul of the Jos Plateau, Nigeria” in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona, (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2001), 89.

practices of Ifa and erindinlogun and its use also gives deeper insight into practitioners' most immediate concerns as it assists them in navigating the existential journey which is one often filled with angst and absurdity. As such, even more transdisciplinary studies on the functioning of this special object-entity, as well as other quotidian practices, are warranted.

In addition to heeding the call toward transdisciplinarity, I have also sought to engage Okot P'Bitek's call for a decolonization of the study of African religions,²³⁸ most notably through shifts in language. While, as Kwasi Wiredu rightly asserts, it would be foolhardy (as well as impossible) to completely extricate ourselves from all outside influence on African ideas, it is important and necessary to "examine their conceptual inheritance afresh"²³⁹ and seek the most precise language through which to express ideas that may not be directly translatable from one language to another. The heavy weight of European languages—English, in particular—in scholarship and the ways in which certain terms have been (sometimes injuriously) translated, calls for a consistent reevaluation and adjustment of terminology.

This is particularly important since, as elucidated by W.V.O. Quine as he constructed his theory of indeterminacy of translation, translation has inherent power dynamics, rendering interpreters is naturally biased toward his or her own language and

²³⁸ Okot P'Bitek and Kwasi Wiredu, *Decolonizing African Religion: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship* (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011).

²³⁹ *Ibid*, xii.

cultural understandings.²⁴⁰ These power dynamics and, thus, translational indeterminacy are heightened when attempting to translate abstract terms like those typically employed in the study of religion. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, these biases have been particularly strong with reference to indigenous cultures about which research has largely been conducted through “imperial eyes.” Her description of this approach to research is worth quoting at length:

Research “through imperial eyes” describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life, and of human beings. It is an approach to indigenous peoples which still conveys a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to being “progress” into the lives of indigenous peoples—spiritually, intellectually, socially and economically.²⁴¹

The academy, being squarely Eurocentric in orientation, still chiefly encourages scholars to conduct research “through imperial eyes” whereby European and US ideas and ideals (dubbed “Western”) are privileged and considered the norm with the ideas and ideals non-Western peoples on the periphery. In contrast to the single-minded nature of Western powers who have accumulated the capital and global clout to put their world-senses and beliefs forward as “objective” reality that applies—or should apply to all people, Claudine Michel asserts that Africans and people of African descent “...have

²⁴⁰ W.V.O Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 60-68.

²⁴¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed books, 1999), 56.

never had the money, the power or the weapons to be tempted to think that they possess [the only] universal truths or that they could speak with authority for the rest of the world.”²⁴² Instead, most African religions clearly express the idea that their way of being and conceiving of the world is *not* the only valid way of being or conceiving of the world. One refrain from the Ifa corpus, for example, states that “one man’s meat is another man’s poison,” while another states that what is taboo in one person’s home may be acceptable in another person’s home. These proverbs point to the Yoruba conception that no one way of doing things will be universally good for all people and that, instead, all claims must be evaluated in the context in which they arise. I make this point not to argue for a radical relativism that renders ideas untranslatable across cultures. I make it, instead, to highlight the ways in which the colonization of knowledge has subjugated local epistemologies²⁴³ and the importance of highlighting and re-inserting these subjugated epistemologies in their proper place in order to identify and, where necessary, construct the most fitting frameworks of analysis.

This work is necessary in Yoruba religious studies as, despite the breadth of scholarship on Yoruba religion, Jacob Oluṣona has rightly pointed to theory as a neglected area of Yoruba religious studies²⁴⁴ and argued for the continuing need for the

²⁴² Claudine Michel, “Forward to the 2010 Edition” in Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), xiv.

²⁴³ Oyewunmi, 1.

²⁴⁴ Jacob Oluṣona, “The Study of Yoruba Religious Tradition in Historical Perspective,” 263.

construction of indigenous hermeneutics.²⁴⁵ By positing the visual-oral-aural-kinesthetic (VOAK) I have sought to contribute to both of these areas in order to more deeply theorize what has most often been referenced as the “call and response” nature of Yoruba and other African religio-cultures and also to offer this as a useful hermeneutic for examining Ifa-Orisa but also other similar religio-cultures. As the field of Africana Religious Studies continues to develop, it is my hope that other scholars will make use of this framework and also continue to construct other sturdy skeletons upon which the flesh of the lived experience of African religions may rest.

²⁴⁵ Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods*, 1.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abimbola, Wande. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976.
- _____. *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*. Roxbury, MA: Aim Books, 1997.
- _____. *Ifá Divination Poetry*. New York: NOK Publishers, 1977.
- _____. *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá*. S.I.: UNESCO, 1975.
- Abimbola, Kola. *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006.
- Rowland Abiḡdun, "Aṣe: Verbalizing and Visualizing Creative Power through Art." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 24, Fasc. 4 (Nov.1994), 309-322.
- Abiḡdun, Rowland, and British Museum. "What Follows Six Is More than Seven": *Understanding African Art*. Vol. 105. London: British Museum Dept. of Ethnography, 1995.
- Abiḡdun, Rowland, Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton, and Museum Rietberg. *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.
- Adeosun, Kola A. *What the Kolanut Is Saying: The Proper Use Understanding of What the Kolanut Oracle Can Tell Us*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Creative Books, 1999.
- Adewale, S. A. *The Religion of the Yoruba: a Phenomenological Analysis*. Ibadan: Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 1988.
- Adogame, Afe et. al. (eds.) *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality and the Interface with Other World Religions: Essays in Honour of Jacob Kehinde Olupona*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.
- Akintola, Akinbowale, Prince of Igbon. *Yoruba Ethics and Metaphysics : Being Basic Philosophy Underlying the Ifa System of Thought of the Yoruba*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Valour Publishing Ventures Limited, 1999.
- Akintoye, Stephen Adebajji. *A History of the Yoruba People*. Dakar, Senegal: Amalion Publishing, 2010.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

- Amherd, K. Noel. *Reciting Ifa: Difference, Heterogeneity, and Identity*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2010.
- Anderson, Victor. *Against Ontological Blackness*. New York: Continuum, 1999.
- Apffel-Marglin, Frédérique. *Subversive Spiritualities: How Rituals Enact the World*. Oxford Ritual Studies Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Asante, Molefi K, and Abu Shardow Abarry. *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.
- _____. *The Afrocentric Idea, Revised and Expanded Edition*. Revised. Temple University Press, 1998.
- Awolalu, J. Omosade. *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. London: Longman, 1979.
- Aworinde, Awotunde, John Olaniyi Ogundipe, and Judith Illsley Gleason. *A Recitation of Ifa, Oracle of the Yoruba*. New York,: Grossman Publishers, 1973.
- _____. *A Recitation of Ifa, Oracle of the Yoruba*. New York,: Grossman Publishers, 1973.
- Babalawo, Ra Ifagbemi. *The Little Oracle That Goes a Long Way: Ifa's Obi Abata*. Brooklyn, NY: Athelia Henrietta PR, 1999.
- Babalola, E. O. *Studies in the Theology and Sociology of Yoruba Indigenous Religion*. Lagos, Nigeria: Concept Publications (Nig.), 2002.
- Badejo, Diedre. *Oşun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power, and Femininity*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1996.
- Balogun, Babaloloa Joseph. "The Consequentialist Foundation of Traditional Yoruba Ethics: An Exposition." *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophic Association of Kenya*. Vol. 5, No. 2, December 2013, 103-121.
- Bascom, William Russell. *Drums of the Yoruba of Nigeria*. Ethnic Folkways Library FE 1444. 1956.
- _____. *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*. 1st Midland bk. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- _____. *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World*. Indiana University Press, 1980.
- Beckley-Roberts, Lisa Osunleti. "To and Through the Doors of Ocha: Music, Spiritual Transformation, and Reversion Among African American Lucumi." PhD dissertation, Florida State University, 2016.

- Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha M. *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2009 (1992).
- Bewaji, John Ayotunde Isola. "Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture" in *A Companion to African Philosophy* by Kwasi Wiredu, Ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004)
- p' Bitek, Okot. *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Kampala,: East African Literature Bureau, 1970.
- p'Bitek, Okot and Kwasi Wiredu. *Decolonizing African Religion: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship*. New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011.
- Bongmba, Elias Kifon. (ed.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Brandon, George. "The Uses of Plants in Healing in an Afro-Cuban Religion, Santería," *Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 1 (1991), 55-76.
- Brown, David. *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970.
- . *God of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.
- Carroll, Kevin. *Yoruba Religious Carving: Pagan & Christian Sculpture in Nigeria & Dahomey*; London,: G. Chapman, 1967.
- Cox, James L. *Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions*. Religions of Africa ; V. 3. Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998.
- Chesi, Gert, and Susanne Wenger. *A Life with the Gods in Their Yoruba Homeland*. Wörgl, Austria: Perlinger, 1983.
- Danfulani, Umar Habila Dadem. "Pa Divination: Ritual Performance and Symbolism among the Ngas, Mupun, and Mwaghavul of the Jos Plateau, Nigeria" in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona, (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2001)
- Diamond, Stanley. *In Search of the Primitive*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1974.
- Doniger, Wendy. *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (1998).

- Drewal, Henry John. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. New York: Center for African Art in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1985.
- Drewal, Henry John, and Margaret Thompson Drewal. *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Dundes, Alan. *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. University of California Press, 1984.
- Eason, Louis Djisovi Ikukomi. *IFA: The Yoruba God of Divination in Nigeria and the United States*. First. Africa World Press, 2008.
- Edmonson, Charles Howard. "Viability of Coconut Seeds After Floating in Sea." Bernice P. Bishop Museum Occasional Papers (Vol.16, No.12: December 1941).
- Egberongbe, Prince Wale. *African Traditional Religion: We Are No Pagans*. Lagos, Nigeria: Nelson Publishers Limited, 2003.
- Elebuibon, Ifayemi. *The Adventures of Obatala*. Oyo State, Nigeria: A.P.I. Production, 1989.
- Eliade, Mircea, 1907-1986. *The Myth of the Eternal Return, Or, Cosmos and History*. Vol. 46. Bollingen Series ; 46. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- . *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion*. Vol. TB81. Harper Torchbooks ; New York,: Harper & Row, 1961.
- Epega, Afolabi. *Obi Divination*. New York, NY: Imole Oluwa Institue, 1994.
- Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, ed. *African Philosophy: An Anthology*. 1st ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 1998.
- Fabunmi, M. A. *Ife Shrines*. Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1969.
- Fatunde, Fakayode Fayemi. *Ọsun: The Manly Woman*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2003.
- Fagbemileke Jones-Brown Fatunmise "The Mothers Re-Aligning and Shifting Global Views Producing a New World Pardigm (NWP) for the 21st Century" in *Iyanifa: Woman of Wisdom*, Ayele Kumari, Ed. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014.
- Falola, Toyin, and Ann Genova, eds. *ORIṢA: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora*. Africa World Press, Inc., 2006.
- Finnegan, Ruth H. *The Oral and beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

- Gbadegehin, Segun. *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. 134th ed. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1991.
- van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee; intro. by Solon T. Kimball. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Gordon, Lewis R. *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times*. The Radical Imagination Series. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006.
- . (ed.) *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*. 1st ed. Routledge, 1996.
- . *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- . *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. Routledge, 2000.
- Goody, Jack. *Myth, Ritual and the Oral*. Cambridge, UK ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Grillo, Laura. “Dogon Divination as an Ethic of Nature.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 309–30.
- Grimes, Ronald L., 1943-. *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*. Rev. Studies in Comparative Religion. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.
- Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Temple University Press, 1995.
- . *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Lansing, MI: Sankofa Publishing Co, 1996.
- . *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hackett, Rosalind. *Art and Religion in Africa*. New York: Cassell, 1996.
- Hallen, Barry, and J. O. Sodipo. *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Hallen, Barry. *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse About Values in Yoruba Culture*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.

- Henry, Paget. "African and Afro-Caribbean Existential Philosophies." In *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, Lewis Gordon, Ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.
- Hucks, Tracey. *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2012.
- . "From Cuban Santeria to African Yoruba: Evolutions in African American Oriṣa History, 1959-1970" in *Oriṣa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona, Terry Rey (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 337-354.
- Hughes, Jennifer. "Mysterium Materiae: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, Volume 41, Number 4, November 2012, 16-22.
- Idowu, Bolaji. *Olodumare; God in Yoruba Belief*. New York, NY: Praeger, 1963.
- Jemiriye, Timothy F. *The Yoruba God and Gods*. Ado-Ekiti [Nigeria]: Petoa Educational Publishers, 1998.
- Johnson, Samuel. *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. Lagos, Nigeria: African Books Collective, 2001.
- Karenga, Maulana. *Odù ifá: The Ethical Teachings*. Los Angeles, Calif.: University of Sankore Press, 1999.
- "Kola Nut". 1890. "Kola Nut". *The British Medical Journal* 1 (1530). BMJ: 969–70. <http://www.jstor.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/20238929>.
- Lawal, Babatunde, "Sustaining the Oneness in Their Twoness: Poetics of Twin Figures (Ère Ìbejì) Among the Yoruba." In *Double Trouble Twice Blessed: Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures*, edited by Philip M. Peek. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 81-98.
- Lele, Ócha 'ni. *Obi: Oracle of Cuban Santeria*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2001.
- Long, Charles H. *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Love, Velma. *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness*. University Park, PA: State University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Lucas, J. Olumide. *The Religion of the Yorubas*. New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1996.

- Lugira, Aloysius Muzzanganda. *African Religion: a Prolegomenal Essay on the Emergence and Meaning of African Autochthonous Religions*. Theologie, Philosophie & Ethique Africaine. Nyangwe, Zaïre: Omenana [distributor], 1981.
- Mason, John. *Four New World Yoruba Rituals*. Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1985.
- . *Orin Òrìṣà*. 3rd ed. Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 2013.
- Matory, James Lorand. *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion*. New ed. Berghahn Books, 2005.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970.
- . *Concepts of God in Africa*. London: SPCK, 1970.
- McKenzie, P.R. *Hail Orisha!: A Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Studies on Religion in Africa. Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997.
- Moody-Adams, Michele M. *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Murphy, Joseph M., and Mei-Mei Sanford, eds. *Oṣun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*. Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Nzegwu, Nkiru Uwechia. *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- O'Donoghue, Michael, Marion Maddox, and Norman C Habel. *Myth, Ritual and the Sacred: Introducing the Phenomena of Religion: Study Text*. Texts in Humanities. Underdale, S. Aust.: Texts in Humanities, University of South Australia, 1993.
- Oduyoye, Modupe. *The Vocabulary of Yoruba Religious Discourse*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1971.
- . *Words & Meaning in Yoruba Religion : Linguistic Connections in Yoruba, Ancient Egyptian & Semitic*. London: Karnak House, 1996.
- Ogundiran, Akinwumi and Paula Saunders. *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Ogunbowale, P. O. *Àwọn Irínmalẹ̀ Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá. Àtúntẹ̀*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Evans Bros. (Nigeria Publishers), 1980.

- Ogunnaike, Oludamini. "Ifa and Sufism: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions." PhD Dissertation, Harvard University 2015.
- Ogunyemi, Yemi D. *Introduction to Yoruba Philosophy, Religion and Literature*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Athelia Henrietta Press, Inc., 1998.
- . *The Oral Traditions in ILE-IFE: The Yoruba People and Their Book of Enlightenment*. Academica Pr Llc, 2009.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *The Oral Performance in Africa*. 3rd ed. Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 2003.
- Olademo, Oyeronke "Religion and Women's Sexuality in Africa: The Intersection of Power and Vulnerability." In *Women and New and Africana Religions, Women and Religion in the World*, Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, Darnise C. Martin, and Oyeronke Olademo, Eds. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).
- Olademo Olajubu, Oyeronke. *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*. State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Olupona, Jacob K. and Rowland Abiodun. *Ifá Divination, Knowledge, Power, and Performance, African Expressive Cultures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.
- . *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*. World Spirituality V. 3. New York: Crossroad, 2000.
- . *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- . "The Study of Yoruba Religion Tradition In Historical Perspective." *Numen* 40(3) Sep. 1993: 240-273
- . *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*. 1st ed. New York: International Religious Foundation, 1991.
- Olupona, Jacob K. and David Carrasco, Eds. *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Olupona, Jacob K, and Terry Rey, Eds. *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion : The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.
- Oluwole, Sophie Bosede. *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*. Lagos, Nigeria: Ark Publishers, 2014.

- Omari-Tunkara, Mikelle Smith. *Manipulating the Sacred: Yoruba Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomble*. Wayne State Univ Pr, 2006.
- Omoregbe, Joseph. "African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today" in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed. *African Philosophy: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
- Onyeidu, S. O. *Traditional Concepts of God in Africa*. Nsukka, Nigeria: Department of Religion, University of Nigeria, 1998.
- Ortner, Sherry B. "On Key Symbols." *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 75, No. 5 (Oct., 1973), pp. 1338-1346.
- Osundiya, Baba. *Awo Obi: Obi Divination in Theory and Practice*. Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan. "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration." *African Studies Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Mar., 1987), pp. 79-99.
- . *A Kì Í: Yorùbá Proscriptive and Prescriptive Proverbs*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988.
- . "With Friends like These... A Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies Epistemology and Methodology." *African Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Dec., 1994), pp. 77-101.
- . *Yoruba Trickster Tales*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Oyewumi, Oyeronke. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Paris, Peter J. *The Spirituality of African Peoples: the Search for a Common Moral Discourse*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- . *What Gender Is Motherhood?: Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity*. Springer, 2015.
- Palmié, Stephan. *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Parrinder, Edward Geoffrey. *West African Religion, a Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples*. London,: Epworth Press, 1961.
- Patton, Kimberley C. *The Sea Can Wash Away All Evils: Modern Marine Pollution and the Ancient Cathartic Ocean*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- . *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

- Peek, Philip. *Double Trouble, Twice Blessed: Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Peel, J. D. Y. "The Pastor and the 'Babalawo': The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. Vol. 60, No. 3 (1990), pp. 338-369
- _____. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. African Systems of Thought. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Peirce, Charles S. (1896). "The Regenerated Logic." *The Monist*, Vol. 7, No. 1:19-40.
- Pendergrast, Mark. *For God, Country and Coca-Cola: The Unauthorized History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company That Makes It*, 1st Collier Books ed. New York: Collier Books, 1994.
- Pérez, Elizabeth. *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.
- Preucel, Robert W. *Archaeological Semiotics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- Quine, W.V.O. *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013.
- Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Ramos, Miguel "Willie". *Obí Agbón: Lukumí Divination with Coconut*. Miguel "Willie" Ramos, 2012.
- Ray, Benjamin C. *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000.
- Salami, Ayo. *Yorùbá Theology & Tradition: The Genealogy*. Lagos, Nigeria: NIDD Publishing Co., 2008.
- Seligman, Adam B. et. al. *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*. Oxford ;New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Selvadurai, Sita. *Obatala's Blessing and Other Stories*. Colombo: Sita Selvadurai, 1989.
- Sharma, Arvind. *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006.
- Simpson, George E. *Yoruba Religion and Medicine in Ibadan*. Ibadan University Press, 1991.

- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed books, 1999.
- Stewart, Dianne M. *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Stewart Diakit , Dianne and Tracey E. Hucks. "Africana Religious Studies: Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field." *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013), 28-77.
- Sundermeier, Theo. *The Individual and Community in African Traditional Religions*. Beitr ge Zur Missionswissenschaft Und Interkulturellen Theologie ; Bd. 6. Hamburg: Lit ;, 1998.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*. Vol. 1984. Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures; Cambridge [England] ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Thompson Drewal, Margaret. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. Vintage Books Vintage, 1984.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Fwd. by Roger D. Abrahams. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995.
- Washington, Teresa N. *Manifestations of Masculine Magnificence: Divinity in Africana Life, Lyrics, and Literature*. Baltimore, MD: Oya's Tornado, 2014.
- Washington, Teresa N. *The Architects of Existence: Aje in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology, and Orature*. Baltimore, MD: Oya's Tornado, 2014.
- Winkelman, Michael and Philip Peek. *Divination and Healing: Potent Vision*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2004.
- Wiredu, Kwasi, ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy*. 1st ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.
- . *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Wood, Funlayo E. "Sacred Healing and Wholeness in Africa and the Americas." *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 3 (2013), 376-383.