

# Deity from a Python, Earth from a Hen, Humankind from Mystery: Narrative and Knowledge in Yorùbá Cosmology

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## Abstract

Yorùbá cosmology represents a significant lacuna in Yorùbá studies. Unfortunately, originary narratives within this cosmology tend not to be explicitly investigated at the level of epistemology. As concerns methodology, phenomenological studies of Yorùbá cosmology are rare and typically gain less traction than studies produced using preponderant social scientific approaches. In this essay, entitled “Deity from a Python, Earth from a Hen, Humankind from Mystery: Narrative and Knowledge in Yorùbá Cosmology,” I argue that a phenomenological analysis of originary narratives in Yorùbá cosmology illumines the presence of *orienting concepts* that articulate a Yorùbá epistemological perspective. We find in some of these narratives five orienting concepts that convey this perspective: mystery, materially-based relationality, unpredictability, the permanency of existential conflict, and irresolution.

**Keywords:** Yoruba culture, Yoruba religion, narrative, phenomenology, cosmology, epistemology.

## Divindade de uma píton, terra de uma galinha, humanidade do mistério: narrativa e conhecimento na cosmologia Iorubá

## Resumo

A cosmologia Yorùbá representa uma lacuna significativa nos estudos sobre Yorùbá. Infelizmente, narrativas originárias dentro desta cosmologia tendem a não ser explicitamente investigadas no nível da epistemologia. No que diz respeito a metodologia, estudos fenomenológicos da cosmologia Yorùbá são raros e geralmente recebem menos atenção do que os estudos produzidos utilizando abordagens preponderantes das ciências sociais. Neste ensaio, intitulado “Divindade de uma Python, Terra de uma galinha, humanidade do Mistério: Narrativa e Conhecimento na cosmologia Iorubá” argumento que uma análise fenomenológica de narrativas originárias na cosmologia Iorubá ilumina a presença de conceitos orientadores que articulam uma perspectiva

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epistemológica Yorùbá. Nós encontramos em algumas dessas narrativas cinco conceitos orientadores que transmitem essa perspectiva: mistério, relacionalidade de base material, imprevisibilidade, a permanência de conflito existencial, e indecisão.

**Palavra-chave:** Cultura Iorubá, religião Iorubá, narrativa, humanidade do mistério, cosmologia, episemologia.

## **Divinidad de una pitón, tierra de una gallina, humanidad del misterio: narrativa y conocimiento en la cosmología Yoruba**

### **Resumen**

La cosmología Yoruba representa una laguna significativa en los estudios sobre Yoruba. Infelizmente, narrativas originarias dentro de esta cosmología tienden a no ser explícitamente investigadas en el nivel de la epistemología. En lo respecta a la metodología, estudios fenomenológicos da cosmología Yoruba son raros y generalmente reciben menos atención que los estudios producidos utilizando abordajes preponderantes de las ciencias sociales. En este ensayo, intitulado “Divinidad de una Pitón, Tierra de una gallina, humanidad del Misterio: Narrativa y Conocimiento en la cosmología yoruba” argumento que un análisis fenomenológico de narrativas originarias en la cosmología yoruba ilumina la presencia de conceptos orientadores que articulan una perspectiva epistemológica Yoruba. Encontramos en algunas de esas narrativas cinco conceptos orientadores que transmiten esa perspectiva: misterio, relacionalidad de base material, imprevisibilidad, la permanencia de conflicto existencial, e indecisión.

**Palabra-clave:** Cultura Yoruba, religión Yoruba, narrativa, humanidad del misterio, cosmología, epistemología.

Since the publication in 1852 of Samuel Ajayi Crowther’s *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yorùbá Language*, Yorùbá and Yorùbá-based cultural traditions historically associated with southwestern Nigeria have garnered considerable scholarly attention, perhaps more so than most other Sub-Saharan African continental and diasporic traditions. This attention encompasses a range of topical foci, some of which include explicating Yorùbá conceptions of *Olódùmarè* (the chief Yorùbá deity) in comparative reference to monotheistic Judeo-Christian ideas of “God,” analysis of the sacred oral literary corpus known as *Odù Ifá*, Western feminism’s gendered invention of “women” in Yorùbá contexts, the inveterate sacral significance of the ancient Yorùbá city of *Ilé-Ifè*, and the embodied traditions of Yorùbá-derived Cuban Santería and Bahian Candomblé<sup>1</sup>. Also of

<sup>1</sup> See IDÒWÚ, Bólájí E. *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longmans, 1962; ABÍMBÒLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976; OYÈWÚMÍ, Oyèrónkè. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; OLÚPÒNÀ, Jacob K. *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011; DANIEL, Yvonne. *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou*,

increasing interest to researchers is the examination of Yorùbá traditions within the broader experience of global encounter<sup>2</sup>. Scholarship based on these predominant research vectors has undoubtedly contributed much to the field of Yorùbá studies, and subsequently to our understanding of the socio-historical forces and cultural structures implicated by the term “Yorùbá”<sup>3</sup>. However, despite the voluminous literature in this field, there remain lacunae in need of critical exploration.

One such lacuna involves Yorùbá cosmology, a dynamically elaborate spiritual system upon which diverse Yorùbá ethnic communities rely for meaning and social cohesion. This cosmology is widely recognized as a bedrock of Yorùbá culture. Nevertheless, for reasons not entirely clear, Yorùbá cosmology tends not to be explicitly investigated as a distinct knowledge tradition. Moreover, the originary narratives grounding Yorùbá cosmology – that is, stories explaining the creation of the world as well as vital relationships within and between the physical and spiritual dimensions – are often not thoroughly considered as possible sources of epistemologically significant content. As concerns methodology, phenomenological studies of Yorùbá cosmology are rare<sup>4</sup> and typically gain less traction than studies produced using the preponderant social scientific approaches of cultural anthropology, ethnography, and sociology. The preponderance

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**Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé.** Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. Also worth mentioning is George Brandon’s seminal analysis of the historical emergence of Cuban Santería as well as his important critique of syncretism as an inadequate theoretical model. See BRANDON, George. **Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993; The social function of Yorùbá festivals represents another major focus in Yorùbá studies. See OLÚPÒNÀ, Jacob K. **Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yorùbá Festivals.** Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991; APTER, Andrew. **Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yorùbá Society.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. For a more recent philosophical treatment of continental Yorùbá traditions, see ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account.** Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, PEEL, J. D. Y. **Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yorùbá.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000; OLÚPÒNÀ, Jacob K. and REY, Terry, eds. **Ọ̀risha Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture.** Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Yorùbá” also encompasses discrete ethnic subgroups whose cultural traditions dynamically constitute a shared cosmology. William Bascom identifies twenty-three of these subgroups, including the Ana, Isha, Idasha, Shabe, Ketu, Ifonyin, Awori, Egbado, Egba, Ijebu, Oyo, Ifẹ̀, Ijesha, Ondo, Owọ̀, Ilaje, Ekiti, Igbomina, Yagba, Bunu, Aworo, Itsekiri, and the Owu. BASCOM, William R. **The Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria.** Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1984, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> While incorporating social scientific methods, Olúpòná’s **Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community** remains one of the few and most extensive phenomenological studies of Yorùbá cosmology as a socio-temporally transformative cultural tradition.

of approaches of the anthropological variety beginning in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries leads one to wonder in whose cultural image Yorùbá cosmology has been discursively molded<sup>5</sup>.

Departing from this methodological canon, the present essay utilizes a phenomenological frame of analysis moderately informed by Jacob Olúpòṇà's 1991 monograph *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yorùbá Festivals*. In this study, Olúpòṇà's critical interpretation of several major religious festivals held in the Ondo region of southwestern Nigeria is not determined by the theoretical models and attendant presuppositions of the social sciences, but rather by the actual festivals themselves. While centering on Yorùbá originary narratives rather than festivals or other rituals, the focus of the pages to follow nonetheless sets a goal similar to Olúpòṇà's; namely, an interpretation of Yorùbá originary narratives based on their content. Bearing this goal in mind, I suggest the existence of an inextricable relationship between cosmology and knowledge in Yorùbá society. More specifically, I argue below that a phenomenological analysis of originary narratives in Yorùbá cosmology illumines the presence of *orienting concepts* that articulate a Yorùbá epistemological perspective. Broadly put, the term *orienting concept* as used here denotes an idea that shapes one's interpretive perception of the world. In a Yorùbá epistemological perspective, orienting concepts may also be understood as indigenous heuristic devices enabling a particular knowledge of reality. We find in the Yorùbá originary narratives to be examined five orienting concepts that convey this knowledge: mystery, materially-based relationality, unpredictability, the permanency of existential conflict, and irresolution.

The analytical scope of this essay includes four documented originary narratives: The first narrative appears to address the genesis of *Olódùmarè*; the second recounts the creation of the physical world and human beings, as well as one deity's (*Òrìṣà-ńlá's*) scheme to gain knowledge not intended for him; A popular variant of the second creation narrative, the third narrative explains, among other things, the establishment and dissolution of an ancient covenant between the plant world, the animal world, and human beings; The fourth and final narrative involves a dispute bearing on the issue of cosmic authority. These four accounts fall within the

<sup>5</sup> The work of Edward Burnett Tylor and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl readily comes to mind here. See, for example, TYLOR, Edward Burnett. **Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom**. New York: Holt, 1889; LÉVY-BRUHL, Lucien. **La Mentalité Primitive (Primitive Mentality)**. Paris: F. Alcan, 1922; LÉVY-BRUHL, Lucien. **Les Fonctions Mentales Dans Les Sociétés Inférieures (How Natives Think)**. Paris: F. Alcan, 1928.

tradition of Yorùbá originary narration ascribing singular importance to the sacred city of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* as well as the conception of the universe as *Igbá Ìwà* (the gourd/calabash of existence)<sup>6</sup>. It is therefore appropriate to begin our analysis with a consideration of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* and *Igbá Ìwà* as linchpins of Yorùbá cosmology.

### ***Ilé-Ifẹ̀ and Igbá Ìwà***

The city of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*, whose combinative name derives from the noun *Ilé* (home, house) and the verb *fẹ̀*, which means to expand or spread out (ABÍMBÓLÁ, 2006, p. 35), is located forty-six miles east of Ìbàdàn, capital of the Nigerian state of Òyó. *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* is regarded both as the primordial home from which the Yorùbá first migrated and as the place where the earth and all terrestrial life were created. As such, *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* is perhaps the most hallowed site in all of Yorùbáland. In this sense, *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* is a spiritual cornerstone of Yorùbá thought. The Yorùbá notion of *Igbá Ìwà* and the communal order of being it encompasses are equally important cornerstones.

In English, the word “gourd” generally refers to a fruit-producing plant of the species *Lagenaria siceraria* and to the fruit’s hard outer shell. However, in *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* narratives, the gourd takes on much greater cosmogenic significance. A profound structural – but non-static – dualism emerges upon considering the Yorùbá description of the universe as *Igbá nlá mèjì s’ojú dé’ra won* (a big gourd with two halves)<sup>7</sup>. On one level, the dualism reflected in both halves of the Yorùbá cosmos is mediated by an ontological idea of dynamically reciprocal union expressed in the statement, *T’ako, t’abo, èjìwàpò* (the male and female in togetherness)<sup>8</sup>. But as we will see later, this cosmic dualism is mediated on another level by a concept of unremitting antagonism. These notions of dualistic, conflictual relation are foundational in Yorùbá conceptualizations of reality.

The *materiality* of *Igbá Ìwà* functions as an embodiment of this tensive cosmic dualism. According to Yorùbá tradition, the top half of *Igbá Ìwà* represents both maleness and the sky, the sky being the spirit world (*Isalorun, Òrun*) whose population consists of invisible spirit beings. The bottom half represents femaleness and contains the raw materials used to

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<sup>6</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

fashion the physical world (*Isalaye, Ayé*)<sup>9</sup>. Although its role as the seedbed of the physical dimension may suggest otherwise, *Igbá Ìwà* is not self-sustaining. The existence of *Igbá Ìwà* and all elements constituting the physical dimension are dependent upon a vital power known as *Àṣẹ*.

*Àṣẹ*, the power that “makes things happen,” stems from *Olódùmarè* and sustains all life on earth (*Ayé*) (ABÍMBÒLÁ, 1997, p. 172)<sup>10</sup>. Yorùbá scholar and priest (*Babalòrìṣà*) Kòlá Abímbòlá outlines a politico-communal order of being<sup>11</sup> as structured within the framework of Yorùbá cosmology. Abímbòlá’s outline is instructive because it makes clear the source of *Àṣẹ* while also providing a sense of how *Àṣẹ* is distributed throughout creation: *Olódùmarè* is joined at the top of the politico-communal order of being by *Ọbàtálá* (*Òrìṣà-ńlá*), *Ifá* (*Ọ̀rúnmilà*), and *Èṣù*, three deities whose roles in Yorùbá originary narratives are arguably more significant than those of other *Òrìṣà* (deities serving as sources of religious devotion and as administrative functionaries of *Olódùmarè*)<sup>12</sup>; The second level is occupied by other *Òrìṣà*, the *Ajogun* (warriors against humanity and the good forces of nature)<sup>13</sup>, and the *Àjé/Èlẹ̀yẹ/Eníyán* (bird people, owner of birds; negative people who have largely relinquished their capacity for goodness in favor of doing the destructive bidding of the *Ajogun*); Humans, plants, and animals make up the third level, while the *Egún/Egúngún*<sup>14</sup>, or *Ará Ọ̀run/Òkú Ọ̀run* (ancestors/denizens of the spirit world) inhabit the

<sup>9</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Lawal adds that *àṣẹ* “is thought to hold the gourd [*Igbá Ìwà*] in space, enabling the sun and moon to shine, wind to blow, fire to burn, rain to fall, rivers to flow, and both living and nonliving things to exist.” LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> The term “politico-communal” seems appropriate given Abímbòlá’s description of the Yorùbá cosmos as a political and existential hierarchy. ABÍMBÒLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, pp. 59-60.

<sup>12</sup> ABÍMBÒLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, pp. 59-60.

<sup>13</sup> ABÍMBÒLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 61. Interviews I conducted in Lagos and Modakeke during the summer of 2013 involving a newly initiated *Babaláwo* (male priest of the *Òrìṣà Ifá*) and the *Araba* (chief priest) of Modakeke complicate Abímbòlá’s conception of the *Ajogun* as categorically antagonistic. Both interviewees divided the *Ajogun* into two classes: the *Ajogun ire* (“good” *Ajogun*), and the *Ajogun ibi* (“bad” *Ajogun*).

<sup>14</sup> The term *Egúngún* also refers to a Yorùbá society dedicated to the veneration of ancestors. ABÍMBÒLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora**. Roxbury, MA: Aim Books, 1997, p. 173.



fourth level<sup>15</sup>. Abímbólá's outline maps the vivifying dispersal of *Àṣẹ* across the four hierarchically-constituted ontological levels comprising the Yorùbá cosmos. Let us now explore several Yorùbá originary narratives that in various ways explain the genesis of this cosmo-ontological structure. The first is a seeming account of *Olódùmarè*'s beginnings, or perhaps the beginnings of the concept of *Olódùmarè*.

### The Birth of *Olódùmarè*?

Yorùbá art historian Babatunde Lawal perceives continuity between the idea of *Ìyá Agbè* (mother), with which the bottom half of *Igbá Ìwà* is associated, and the Yorùbá description of a container lid as *idéri* (cover) or *omóri* (from the terms *omo* - child, and *orí* - on top). He likens the physical support given by a container to its lid to the support a mother gives her child when carrying the child<sup>16</sup>. For Lawal, this linguistic connection, along with the claim made by Yorùbá cultural historian J. Olumide Lucas (1948) and Yorùbá ethnographer E. Bólájí Idòwú (1962) that the *Òrìṣà Odùduwà* appears in some narratives as a mother breast-feeding her child and as an embodiment of *Igbá Ìwà*, stimulates two questions about *Olódùmarè* and the meaning of *Igbá Ìwà*: 1) "Does *Olódùmarè* have a mother? 2) Can the two halves of *Igbá Ìwà* also double as a Mother-and-(male) Child?"<sup>17</sup>? In one Yorùbá tradition, the name *Olódùmarè* derives from the title *Olodù-omo-erè*, or, more specifically, the word *Olódù*, which, according to the following *Ifá* verse, signifies "the child of a female python:"

<sup>15</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 60. ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos. **Dialogue and Alliance**, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 78, 1994. Interestingly, P. A. Dopamu translates the term *Ará Òrun* as "visitor from *Òrun*." DOPAMU, P. A. **Traditional Festivals**. In: LAWAL, Nike S., SADIKU, Matthew N. O., and DOPAMU, P. A., eds. *Understanding Yorùbá Life and Culture*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004, p. 656. ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus**. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjiwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjiwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008. The connection Lawal makes here brings to mind Ifi Amadiume's theory of "matricentricity" as an organizing socio-cosmological framework among the Nnobi Igbo of southern Nigeria, as well as Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's specification of the non-gendered concept of "motherhood" as an ideological basis for the communitarian thought traditions found among the Yorùbá. See AMADIUME, Ifi. **Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture**. New York: Zed Books, 1997; OYÈWÙMÍ, Oyèrónké, ed. **African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood**. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003. More recently, Dianne Stewart (formerly Dianne Stewart Diakitè) has constructively explored these ideas within the context of Africana women's experience. See DIAKITÈ, Dianne M. Stewart. "Matricentric" Foundations of Africana Women's Religious Practices of Peacebuilding, Sustainability and Social Change. **Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology**, v. 25, pp. 61-79, 2013.

Ahéré oko sísùn ní mú òpòlò tó lú ní òru  
 A dá fun erè  
 Tí o nfi ekún se iráhùn omo  
 Nwón ní kí ó rúbó kí ó lè bí omo: ewúré kan, aso kījípá ara rẹ, èjilógún  
 O gbó, ó ru  
 Erè sì lóyún, o sì bí omo  
 Àwón ènià sì bèrèsíí wipé ‘lódú nì omo tí erè bí yì’  
 Nígba tí omo náà sì dàgbà, ó sì joba ní ojú iyá rẹ  
 Òun nì gbogbo ènià sì npè ní Olódùmarè títí di òní.

‘When we sleep in the farm hut, frogs jump on us in the night’  
 was the one who cast Ifá [performed divination] for Python  
 when she was weeping and moaning for a child.  
 They say she should sacrifice one she-goat, the homespun cloth she was  
 wearing and eleven shillings so that she might be able to have a child.  
 She heard and made the sacrifice,  
 and Python became pregnant, and she gave birth to a child.  
 And people began to say: ‘One who has Odù’ was this child that  
 Python bore.  
 And when the child grew up, she lived to see him become a king.  
 He is the one whom all people are calling “One who has Odù, child of  
 Python” (Olódùmarè) until this very day<sup>18</sup>.

*Ifá didá*, the systematic divinatory “process” referenced in the verse which is said to have been bequeathed to the Yorùbá people by *Ifá* (the *Òrìṣà* of “wisdom and intellectual development”), will be addressed momentarily<sup>19</sup>. Of interest presently is the significance of this verse vis-à-vis *Olódùmarè* and the verse’s trajectory of meaning.

Lawal suggests that the female python (*erè*)<sup>20</sup> mentioned in this verse may be the Yorùbá deity *Òsùmàrè* (*Èsùmàrè*)<sup>21</sup>. *Òsùmàrè*’s primary symbol is a python, and it is believed *Òsùmàrè* is manifest in the physical world

<sup>18</sup> BASCOM, William R. *Ifá Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969, pp. 322-323. BÀMGBÔṢÉ, Ayọ. The Meaning of Olódùmarè: An Etymology of the Name of the Yorùbá High God. *African Notes: Bulletin of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan*, v. 7, no. 1, p. 27, 1972.

<sup>19</sup> ABÍMBÔLÁ, Kólá. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, pp. 47, 119.

<sup>20</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. *African Arts*, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. *African Arts*, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.



as a rainbow<sup>22</sup>. Wealth and prosperity are also associated with *Òsùmàrè*<sup>23</sup>. The possibility of an ontological link between *Òsùmàrè* and *Olódùmarè* is strengthened by an astute morphological observation made by Idòwú (1962, p. 30) and Bámgbóṣé (1972, pp. 27, 32) regarding the linguistic construction of the appellations *Òsùmàrè* and *Olódùmarè*; namely, that the word *mare* (that which is immense) is found in both appellations. The above verse presents a narrative wherein the being of *Olódùmarè* has its genesis in the creative power of *Ifá didá* physically working through Python.

It is significant that this narrative ascribes to matter and the natural world major roles in the process of bringing *Olódùmarè* into being; *Ifá didá* was *physically performed* on Python's behalf; Python offers "one she-goat, a homespun cloth she was wearing, and eleven shillings" as *material* sacrifices (*ẹbọ*) with the expectation that they will enable her to give birth. An important implication here is that *Olódùmarè's* existence is possible only through relationship with the material world. It is through matter that *Olódùmarè's* being acquires efficacy and therefore becomes meaningful in a universe placing on living creatures the unrelenting demand of regular *material engagement*. The function of *Ifá didá* in this narrative is instructive because it facilitates an awareness of the role of Yorùbá cosmology in the construction of knowledge.

*Ifá didá* functions in the narrative as a materially-rooted epistemological practice that opens creative trajectories of meaning contributing much to the understanding of human existence, the natural world, and the spiritual dimension. *Ifá didá* functions also as a spiritual technology of matter producing in Python a knowledge of herself as a being capable of birthing new life. As a spiritual technology of matter, *Ifá didá* is an epistemological catalyst prompting a conceptualization of *Olódùmarè* as a deity whose being can be interpreted within the framework of a materialist ontology. In addition, *Ifá didá* discloses another level of meaning pertaining to *Igbá Ìwà*; Both halves together (Python and *Olódùmarè*) can be understood as a representation of the relationship between mother and child. This maternal trajectory of meaning is buttressed by the Yorùbá belief that contained within the rainbow is an encrypted message from *Olódùmarè* to *Olódùmarè's* mother, Python of lower *Ọrun*<sup>24</sup>. The generative

<sup>22</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.

material relationship between Python and *Olódùmarè* provides a context for *Olódùmarè*'s authoritative cosmic status and seminal role in the three narratives studied below. We move now to the first of these narratives.

## The Creation of the "Solid Earth" and Human Beings

In the first chapter of *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, author E. Bòlájí Idòwú cites an early Yorùbá originary narrative involving *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* and the creation of the "solid earth." In examining this narrative, readers will notice Idòwú's problematic tendency of referencing the genderless *Olódùmarè* using the pronoun "He," which is not in keeping with descriptions of the chief deity found in Yorùbá oral tradition<sup>25</sup>. The narrative is quoted in full below:

What moved Olódùmarè to think of creating the solid earth, no one knows. However, he conceived the idea and at once carried it into effect. He summoned Òrìṣà-ńlá [Òrìṣà, Qbàtálá, Òṣàálá, Òṣàńlá] the arch-divinity, to His presence and charged him with the duty: for material, He gave him a leaf of loose earth (some say that the loose earth was contained in a snail's shell), and for tools a five-toed hen and a pigeon.

When Òrìṣà-ńlá arrived, he threw the loose earth on a suitable spot on the watery waste. Then he let loose the hen and the pigeon; and these immediately began the work of scattering and spreading the loose earth. This they did until a great portion of the waste was covered. When enough of it had been covered, Òrìṣà-ńlá went back and reported to Olódùmarè that the work had been accomplished. Whereupon, Olódùmarè dispatched the chameleon to go down and inspect what had been done. The chameleon, it must be noted, was chosen on the merit of the extraordinary carefulness and delicacy with which it moves about, and the still more extraordinary way in which it can take in any situation immediately. From the first visit, the chameleon took back the report that although the earth was indeed wide enough, it was not yet sufficiently dry for any further operation; from the second visit, however, it returned with the cheering report that it was both 'wide enough' and sufficiently dry. The sacred spot where the work began was named Ifẹ̀. And that, according to the tradition, was how Ifẹ̀ . . . got its name. The prefix *Ilé* was added much later on to signify that it was the original home of all and to distinguish it from the other towns called Ifẹ̀.

<sup>25</sup> Such gendered descriptions are inconsistent with portrayals of *Olódùmarè* found in *Odù Ifá*. As Abimbólá explains, " . . . the Ifá Literary Corpus always refers to Olódùmarè as an entity who exists in spiritual form only. Ifá does not make use of any genderised personal pronoun to refer to the High 'Deity.' So in reality, Olódùmarè is neither male nor female." ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 51.

When Olódùmarè was satisfied that the work had indeed been accomplished, he sent Òrìṣà-ńlá back to equip and embellish the earth. This time, he sent Ọ̀rúnmilà [Ifá, Orunla] to accompany him and be his counselor. To Òrìṣà-ńlá, Olódùmarè handed the primeval *Igi Ọ̀pẹ* (Palm Tree). This he was to plant – its juice would give drink, its seed would give oil as well as kernels for food. He gave him also three other trees which were full of sap. These were *Irẹ* (Silk Rubber Tree), *Awùn* (Whitewood), and *Dòdò*. These also were to be planted and propagated: their juices would give drink. For as yet, there was no rain upon the earth. The original hen and pigeon which had been used in spreading the loose earth should somehow increase and multiply and provide meat for the dwellers on earth.

Òrìṣà-ńlá came down and did as he was told. When all was ready Ọ̀rẹ̀lúgèrè, one of the beings who had been prepared beforehand, was commissioned to lead a party of those beings down to earth. He brought them down as he was instructed and those became the nucleus of the human occupants of the earth.

When the affairs of the earth had been running for some time and its inhabitants were multiplying, it was discovered that there was not enough water for use. Therefore Òrìṣà-ńlá appealed to Olódùmarè and, as a result, rain began to fall upon the earth.

Òrìṣà-ńlá was assigned another special job. He was made the ‘creator’ of human physical features for the future. It is not clear from the oral traditions when he first began to do the work. However, he got the job, and his allotted duty was thenceforth to mold man’s physical form from the dust of the earth. He thus became the sculptor divinity. But the right to give life Olódùmarè reserved to Himself alone forever. The instruction given to Òrìṣà-ńlá, therefore, was that when he had completed his own part in the creation of man, he should lock up the lifeless form in a room and leave the place. Olódùmarè would then come and give breath [ẹ̀mí], thus completing the creation of the human being.

A story is told of how, once, Òrìṣà-ńlá envied Olódùmarè this right to be the sole Giver of life. He therefore laid a plan to spy on Him. When he had completed his work one day, instead of locking up the completed forms and leaving the place, he locked himself in with them and hid in a corner, awaiting the arrival of Olódùmarè. Olódùmarè, however . . . knew his crafty design and forestalled him by putting him into a deep slumber from which he awoke only when all the forms in his stock had become human beings. Since then, Òrìṣà-ńlá has contented himself with his own allotted part of the work.

The office of a ‘creator’ gave Òrìṣà-ńlá the prerogative to make at will human figures perfect or defective, and of whatever colours he wants them to be. The hunchback, the cripple, or the albino, are special marks of his prerogative or, more often than not, displeasure<sup>26</sup>.

One detects in this narrative an embedded epistemological orientation. The activities of the deities described above play an elemental role in the formation of what Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) calls a Yorùbá “world-sense”<sup>27</sup> that yields distinct knowledge of the cosmos as an environment wherein human meaning is at every stage rooted in the generative entanglement of the spiritual and material dimensions. This distinct knowledge can be explored phenomenologically by attending to ways in which the orienting concepts of mystery, materially-based relationality, unpredictability, the permanency of existential conflict, and irresolution are manifest in the narrative. What follows is an exploration of how the narrative’s engagement of these concepts gives formative expression to a Yorùbá epistemological perspective.

## Mystery

The narrative begins with an assertion of the unknown; a complete understanding of *Olódùmarè*’s purpose in commissioning the creation of the solid earth is beyond the reach of human knowledge. Therefore, efforts to examine Yorùbá cosmology with the goal of probing the deepest meanings related to the origin of the earthly dimension will necessarily include mystery and imaginative speculation. The lack of information regarding *Olódùmarè*’s intention for the terrestrial world implies a circumscription of knowledge. This circumscription applies also to human knowledge of all other non-terrestrial and spiritual phenomena comprising the broader universe. Complete knowledge of *Olódùmarè*’s purpose for the earth, the broader material cosmos, and the spirit world is simply unavailable to the

<sup>26</sup> IDÒWÚ, Bólájí E. *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longmans, 1962, pp. 18-20.

<sup>27</sup> I prefer Oyèwùmí’s use of the term “world-sense” in her deconstructive analysis of European bio-logically based misunderstandings of knowledge production and social organization among the pre-colonial Ọ̀yọ̀-Ọ̀rùbá. She writes, The term “worldview,” which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s privileging of the visual. It is Euro-centric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term “world-sense” is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups. In this study, therefore, “worldview” will only be applied to describe the Western cultural sense, and “world-sense” will be used when describing the Yorùbá or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses. OYÈWÙMÍ, Oyèrónké. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 2-3.

human intellect. This means, for instance, that the ultimate motivating factors for over three billion years of biological evolution and nearly fourteen billion years of cosmic expansion cannot be known. This also means that the primary motives underpinning the complex inner workings of the spirit world are humanly incomprehensible. Our ability as humans to gain a more complete understanding of a particular being is in large measure predicated upon the accessibility of knowledge related to that being's patterns of intentionality. Said differently, a critical understanding of the principal logic governing the creative activity of a being is vital to the acquisition of comprehensive knowledge about that being. Given that human knowledge of *Olódùmarè* does not include an understanding of the principal logic undergirding *Olódùmarè's* creative agenda pertaining to the solid earth or to other dimensions of existence, the deeper recesses of *Olódùmarè's* being remain shrouded in mystery.

The circumscription of knowledge implied by the scarcity of information regarding *Olódùmarè's* intentionality vis-à-vis the creation of the solid earth encompasses human "potential"<sup>28</sup> or destiny. As we have seen, the originary narrative under examination illustrates how the opacity of purpose concerning *Olódùmarè* and the creation of the solid earth functions as a source of the unknown. We find further evidence of ultimate purpose serving this epistemological function upon considering a particular aspect of the Yorùbá understanding of human destiny: the concept of *Orí* (spiritual head, inner head)<sup>29</sup>. The Yorùbá believe that, prior to birth in the physical world, unborn humans select an *Orí* in the spirit world. The purpose of the *Orí* – which itself is worshipped as a deity<sup>30</sup> – is to serve as a lifelong guide steering an individual in a specific direction based upon

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<sup>28</sup> ABÍMBÔLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. *Orí: The Significance of the Head in Yorùbá Sculpture*. **Journal of Anthropological Research**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 91, 1985. Some other related terms include *àyànmó* ("choice"), *ipín* ("predestined share"), *kádàrá* ("divine share for man"), and *ipòrí* ("inner head"). ABÍMBÔLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus**. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 113.

<sup>30</sup> ABÍMBÔLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus**. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 114. Abimbólá elaborates on the significance of *Orí* when he writes, Since every man's *Orí* is his personal god, he is more interested in the welfare of the individual than the other gods. Therefore, if an individual is in need of anything, he should first of all make his desires known to his *Orí* before he approaches any other god for assistance. If a man's *Orí* is not in sympathy with his cause, no god will sympathize with him and consequently he will not have the things he wants. ABÍMBÔLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus**. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 142.

the individual's largely irrevocable choice of *Orí*<sup>31</sup>. There is no guarantee that the chosen *Orí* will be good in nature. This is so because *Àjàlá*, the spiritual entity credited as the supplier of *Orí*, gives to each unborn human an *Orí* that is either good or bad. The nature of the chosen *Orí* cannot be known beforehand. Thus, the kind of *Orí* an individual selects is purely a matter of chance.

<sup>31</sup> The belief in the unalterability of human destiny comports with a related belief in the *Òrìṣà*'s inability to change a person's destiny once the choice of *Orí* has been made. ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus**. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 145. It is also important to acknowledge that, according to one verse from *Odù Òṣà Méjì*, most humans select a bad *Orí* and consequently fail in life, despite continual efforts to improve their destiny:

Bí ó bá ẹ pé gbogbo orí gbogbo ní í sun pòsí,  
 Ìròkò gbogbo ibá ti tán n'ígbo.  
 A diá fún igba ẹni,  
 Ti nt'ìkòlẹ̀ ọrun bọ wá sí t'ayé.  
 Bí ó bá ẹ pé gbogbo orí gbogbo ní í sun pòsí,  
 Ìròkò gbogbo ibá ti tán n'ígbo.  
 A diá fún Òwèrè,  
 Ti nt'ìkòlẹ̀ ọrun bọ wá sí t'ayé.  
 Òwèrè là njà,  
 Gbogboo wa.  
 Òwèrè là njà.  
 Ẹni t'ó yan'rí rere kò wọpọ.  
 Òwèrè là njà,  
 Gbogboo wa.  
 Òwèrè là njà.

("If all men were destined to be buried in coffins,  
 all irókò trees would have been exhausted in the forest.  
 Ifá divination was performed for two hundred men  
 who were coming from heaven to earth.

If all men were destined to be buried in coffins,  
 all irókò trees would have been exhausted in the forest.  
 Ifá divination was also performed for Struggle  
 who was coming from heaven to earth.

We are only struggling.

All of us.

We are only struggling.

Those who chose good destinies are not many.

We are only struggling.

All of us.

We are only struggling"). ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus**. Ibadan:

Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, pp. 146-147.

Also important to mention is the belief that only *Òrúnmilà/Ifá* (the deity of knowledge and wisdom)<sup>32</sup> knows the nature of each human being's *Orí* as well as the nature of each *Òrìṣà's Orí*<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, the nature of a person's *Orí* cannot be determined from physical attributes or behavioral characteristics. As one researcher puts it,

... nobody can tell who has chosen a bad or a good *Orí*. The shape or size of a bad head may not be different from that of a good one. The type of *Orí* chosen by a particular person remains unknown to him and to all other men; it is *Òrúnmilà* alone, as the only witness of the act of the choice of destiny, who can tell what type of head each person has chosen. Hence the need for every person to consult *Òrúnmilà* from time to time<sup>34</sup>.

This understanding of *Orí* is consistent with a verse (*ẹṣẹ*) from *Ọsá Méjì*, the tenth *Odù* (book, chapter)<sup>35</sup> of the *Ifá* oral corpus:

Orí burúkú kí í wú tuulu.  
A kí í dá ẹṣẹ aṣiwèrèé mò lójú-òṅà.  
A kí í m'orí olóyè lówùjọ.  
A diá fún Móbówú  
Tí í ẹ obinrin Ògún.  
Orí tí ó jọba lọla,  
Ẹnikan ò mò;  
Kí tọkọ-taya ó mò pe'raa wọn ní were mò.  
Orí tí ó jọba lọla,  
Ẹnikan ò mò.

<sup>32</sup> ABÍMBÒLÁ, Kólá. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup> It is believed that each of the *Òrìṣà* also has his or her own *Orí*, the “wishes” of which can only be determined through “consultation” with *Òrúnmilà*. What is more, knowledge of *Òrúnmilà's* own *Orí* does not automatically accrue to him. Instead, like human beings and the other *Òrìṣà*, *Òrúnmilà* must make use of his “Ifá divination instruments in order to find out the wishes of his *Orí*.” ABÍMBÒLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> ABÍMBÒLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 147.

<sup>35</sup> ABÍMBÒLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*. Roxbury, MA: AIM Books, 1997, p. 174. ABÍMBÒLÁ, Kólá. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 47. The *Ifá* corpus consists of 256 *Odù*, each containing between 600 and 800 *ẹṣẹ*. The first 16 *Odù* are considered major, whereas the remaining 240 are considered minor.



A bad head does not swell up.  
 Nobody knows the foot-prints of a mad man on the road.  
 Nobody can distinguish the head destined to wear a crown in an assembly.  
 Ifá divination was performed for Mòbówú  
 who was the wife of Ògún.  
 The head that will reign tomorrow,  
 nobody knows it.  
 Let husband and wife stop calling each other names.  
 The head that will reign tomorrow,  
 nobody knows it<sup>36</sup>.

This verse further grounds the Yorùbá conception of *Orí* as an elusive reality to which humans ironically have limited access. The verse also amplifies the uncertainty involved in the selection of *Orí*. In order for a person to gain knowledge of her *Orí*, she must actively seek the wisdom of *Òrúnmìlà*. However, seeking this wisdom does not eliminate the mysterious uncertainty accompanying all efforts to attain the destiny desired by one's *Orí*<sup>37</sup>. Yet, effort remains a crucial component of *Orí*.

The attainment of human destiny is possible only through protracted struggle on the part of the individual. The necessity of this struggle is expressed by the idea of *ẹsẹ* (leg, legs)<sup>38</sup>. Wándé Abímbólá (1978) explains the relationship between *ẹsẹ* and *Orí* in the following manner:

Whether or not the individual has chosen a good *orí*, he must still labor to realize his potential: hence the concept of *ẹsẹ*. Just as every individual has chosen an *orí*, he also has his own *ẹsẹ* with which he will have to struggle in life to aid his *orí* in the realization of his destiny. *Ẹsẹ* represents the principle of activity and struggle without which even the best *orí* cannot unfold its good potentialities. As for those who have chosen bad *orí*, they have to work harder and struggle more with their *ẹsẹ* before they can achieve success in life<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, pp. 27, 147-148, 247.

<sup>37</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 115.

<sup>38</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kólá. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 80. ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Yorùbá Traditional Religion*. In: IBISH, Yusuf and MARCULESCU, Ileana, eds. *Contemplation and Action in World Religions: Selected Papers from the Rothko Chapel Colloquium "Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action."* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1978, p. 234.

<sup>39</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Yorùbá Traditional Religion*. In: IBISH, Yusuf and MARCULESCU, Ileana, eds. *Contemplation and Action in World Religions: Selected Papers from the Rothko Chapel Colloquium "Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action."* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1978, p. 234.

An important insight we can glean from Abímbólá's explanation is that while ongoing struggle makes the realization of one's destiny more likely, such struggle does not guarantee the realization of one's destiny. This insight – along with a consideration of the opacity of ultimate purpose as regards the provision of *Orí* by *Àjàlá* and a recognition of human beings' limited access to information about the true nature of any given *Orí* – makes visible the presence of mystery in the Yorùbá conception of destiny. The intended meaning of the term “opacity of ultimate purpose” in reference to *Orí* is simply this: In a final analysis, it is unclear why the kind of *Orí* chosen by an unborn person is a matter left to chance. Moreover, it is also unclear why knowledge of the true nature of a person's *Orí* is not more readily available. These points together represent an element of mystery endemic to Yorùbá cosmology. One must recognize, then, that this mysterious element tempers a Yorùbá epistemology of human existence, thereby keeping alive an experience among the Yorùbá of the human being as a source of the unknown.

The circumscription of knowledge signaled by the originary narrative of the creation of the solid earth and human beings through its assertion of *Olódùmarè*'s opaque intentionality and through its consistency with the mysterious concept of *Orí* comprehends the spiritual dimension as well. This is evident upon attending to the narrative's portrayal of the deity *Òrìṣà-ńlá*. Recall that *Òrìṣà-ńlá* is accompanied by *Òrúnmilà*, who is to serve as his “counselor.” *Òrúnmilà* accompanies *Òrìṣà-ńlá* by mandate of *Olódùmarè*. At first blush, this detail may appear insignificant. However, one's impression changes when taking into account what this detail implies about the nature of knowledge in the context of the spiritual dimension.

One is compelled to question *Olódùmarè*'s decision to assign *Òrúnmilà* to *Òrìṣà-ńlá* in an advisory role, especially given *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s status as the eldest *Òrìṣà*<sup>40</sup>. On one level, *Òrúnmilà*'s station as the deity of knowledge and wisdom renders *Olódùmarè*'s decision less than surprising. On another level, this decision reflects *Olódùmarè*'s acknowledgement of the imperfect nature of knowledge even among the *Òrìṣà*. *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s seniority does not mean that his knowledge of the cosmos is complete and hence not needful of further guidance and augmentation. This aspect of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s depiction in the narrative provides a clue as to how the idea of knowledge is understood in Yorùbá epistemology.

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<sup>40</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kólá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 124.

The depiction of *Òrìṣà-ńlá* suggests knowledge is understood in Yorùbá epistemology as an *interdimensional phenomenon* fluidly operating in both the material and immaterial dimensions. The narrative's depiction of *Òrìṣà-ńlá* also suggests that knowledge is a dialectical phenomenon defined positively by what it produces (i.e., understanding) and negatively by its limitations (i.e., that which lies outside the conceptual grasp of knowledge). We might think of *Òrúnmilà* in this narrative context as a symbolic representation of the mystery-laden limitations and necessary but tempered augmentation of *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* knowledge. Moreover, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* unintentionally punctuates the importance of mystery as a theoretical component in the Yorùbá conception of knowledge by unsuccessfully attempting to outwit *Olódùmarè* in hopes of gaining access to the most esoteric and powerful recesses of *Olódùmarè's* knowledge.

### ***Òrìṣà-ńlá's* Scheme**

In the narrative, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* grows desirous of the knowledge necessary to animate the human forms he creates. This knowledge, however, is the exclusive domain of *Olódùmarè*. Undaunted, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* devises a scheme; he hides among the inanimate human forms awaiting “breath” (*ẹmí*) from *Olódùmarè*<sup>41</sup> in order to surreptitiously observe the divine bestowal of life and thereby acquire knowledge he otherwise would not possess. However, *Olódùmarè* foils *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* plan by causing him to sleep through the moment during which his “sculpted” human forms are infused with *ẹmí*. The thwarting of this ill-advised scheme is important for our understanding of Yorùbá epistemology, for it heuristically represents the bounded nature of knowledge. Interestingly, though, *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* scheme and *Olódùmarè's* response are significant also because they point toward that for which knowledge ultimately strives: an exhaustive understanding of the unknown.

It has been observed that Yorùbá epistemology conceptualizes knowledge in close relation to the multifaceted mystery circumscribing knowledge. In fact, in a Yorùbá perspective, knowledge and mystery make little sense in isolation from each other. The ideas of knowledge and mystery are intelligible within the framework of Yorùbá epistemology because both ideas are bound together in a theoretical tension wherein the meaning of mystery clarifies the meaning of knowledge, and vice versa. What the narrative of *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* scheme contributes to our understanding of the Yorùbá conception of knowledge is an emphasis on the *seeking orientation of knowledge*.

<sup>41</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kólá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 80.

The term *seeking orientation of knowledge* draws attention to knowledge as a phenomenon that, in the interest of expanding the scope of its intellectual domain, constantly reaches for ever more sophisticated understandings of existence (*wíwà*)<sup>42</sup>. As new understandings of the world develop, these understandings enable new questions about the world, questions that may not have been previously considered, and answers to these new questions are sought. However, Yorùbá epistemology adds the following caveat: Despite the seeking orientation of knowledge, knowledge cannot apprehend existence in its most arcane form; in other words, knowledge lacks the ontological standing necessary for such apprehension. The narrative of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s scheme strongly implies this caveat.

Regarding *Olódùmarè*'s obstruction of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s scheme, I would speculatively argue that the former is motivated less by an interest in simply underscoring the ascendancy of mystery and more by a commitment to facilitating and preserving a certain mode of relationality within the spiritual dimension; *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s unexpected encounter with mystery in the form of *Olódùmarè*'s superior intellect and power occasions in him an acute awareness and "content" acceptance of his role as the "sculptor divinity" as well as a sober acknowledgment of the limitations inherent in this role. Relationally speaking, encounter with mystery enables *Òrìṣà-ńlá* to remain attuned to the will of *Olódùmarè*. This analysis suggests the functionality of mystery in Yorùbá epistemology; ironically, mystery makes possible the conceptualization of the idea of knowledge while also facilitating meaningful spiritual relationships. To put the latter point another way, the delimited nature of knowledge in the human world makes relationship with the spiritual world and its vast repository of knowledge a necessity. However, one must bear in mind that, for the Yorùbá, the significance of relationality is always tied to the material dimension. Indeed, relationality is a foundational theoretical component in the Yorùbá conception of the material world. This brings us to materially-based relationality, a second orienting concept found in the narrative of the creation of the solid earth and human beings.

## **Materially-Based Relationality**

*Òrìṣà-ńlá* is the most salient expression of materially-based relationality in this account. His creative participation in the making of the solid earth foregrounds a tactile, fecund relationship with matter: The items given to *Òrìṣà-ńlá* by *Olódùmarè* for use in the creation of the solid earth

<sup>42</sup> FAKINLEDE, Kayode J. **Existence**. Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary. New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003, p. 152.

consist of “a leaf of loose earth,” “a five-toed hen,” and “a pigeon,” all of which are tangible physical objects composed of matter. After traveling to the appropriate location, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* casts the loose earth onto the “watery waste,” at which point he releases the hen and pigeon. The hen and pigeon then spread the newly-strewn loose earth across vast distances in all directions. Upon receipt of the chameleon’s second inspection report indicating that the new land is sufficiently “wide” and “dry” to accommodate further enhancement, *Olódùmarè* supplies *Òrìṣà-ńlá* with more matter in the form of the *Igi Òpẹ* (Palm Tree), *Irẹ* (Silk Rubber Tree), *Awùn* (Whitewood Tree), and *Dòdo* (Tambalacoque Tree), all of which are planted to provide liquid nourishment for the new land’s inhabitants. Through proliferation over time, the role of the hen and pigeon as “tools” of creation shifts to that of food source. *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s activity in this narrative prompts the question: Is the significance of matter in Yorùbá cosmology limited to matter’s status as evidence of the creative actions of spirit beings?

Extending beyond the realm of the evidentiary, the significance of matter in Yorùbá cosmology has a pronounced epistemological dimension, and one must ask why this is the case. This pronounced epistemological significance stems from the role of matter as the primary theater of *all* human knowing and action. Matter, knowledge, action, and spirit thus emerge as inextricable realities in a Yorùbá perspective. The epistemological significance of matter in the narrative of the creation of the solid earth and human beings becomes apparent upon observing *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s relationship to matter. This relationship is far from superficial or exploitative, for it is only through matter that *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s creative mandate is given meaningful expression.

What is more, *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s relationship to matter highlights matter as a prime source of creative spiritual power that remains connected to the mysterious, fecund will of *Olódùmarè*. Additionally, matter functions in Yorùbá cosmology as the raw “stuff” (*kiní kan, nnkan*) upon which the “spiritual technology” utilized by *Òrìṣà-ńlá* in the creation of the solid earth depends for actualization<sup>43</sup>. These points indicate the importance of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s relationship to matter for our understanding of Yorùbá epistemology. Matter emerges through this relationship not as inert stuff but as a reconfigurable vessel of spiritual power that, by way of engage-

<sup>43</sup> FAKINLEDE, Kayode J. **Stuff**. Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary. New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003, p. 411. My use of the term “spiritual technology” reflects a conceptual indebtedness to Dianne Stewart who, during several personal conversations held over the past six years, referred to specialized African religio-practical systems as “mystical technologies.”

ment, yields knowledge of the physical world as an environment shaped by profound creative potential and flux. From the perspective of Yorùbá epistemology, relationship with the matter comprising the physical world is a cardinal locus of knowledge production. Knowledge is not gained through an intellectual retreat into self that distances the operation of the mind, body, and spirit from matter. Rather, knowledge is acquired through relational participation in the chaos of material existence. The aim of this participation is not the permanent taming of matter. Instead, the aim is the cultivation of a constructive, communally beneficial relationship with the sacred power sustaining matter. Nonetheless, relational participation in materiality is fraught with dangerous uncertainty; hence the third orienting concept to be discussed: unpredictability.

### **Unpredictability**

*Òrìṣà-ńlá's* creative mandate in the narrative is not restricted to the formation of the solid earth. *Olódùmarè* also appoints him to the role of sculptor divinity, which means that his creative responsibilities additionally include the “molding” of “human forms” and “features” from the “dust of the earth.” While *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* investiture of creative power excludes the ability to give life, it does grant him the “prerogative” of making human forms “perfect” or “defective” depending upon his pleasure or “displeasure.” *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* creative prerogative as the sculptor divinity introduces uncertainty into the existential situation of material relationality. The fashioning of matter into physically optimal or suboptimal human forms is subject to *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* caprice. This caprice represents the power to materially exacerbate human suffering through somatic malformation or mitigate human suffering through healthy somatic formation. The unpredictability of *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* role as the sculptor divinity prefigures the dangerously unpredictable dimension of matter itself as a reconfigurable vessel of spiritual power.

The unpredictable dimension of matter as reflected in *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* somewhat whimsical role as sculptor divinity evokes the functions of mystery and materially-based relationality as orienting concepts in Yorùbá epistemology; the concept of materially-based relationality grounds human knowledge in the dynamic entanglement with matter ensuing from existence in the physical world, while the concept of mystery radically delimits the scope of human knowledge. As mentioned earlier, the concept of unpredictability adds to our understanding of material entanglement the element of dangerous uncertainty. This leads to an important point worth accenting: In conjunction with mystery, unpredictability destabilizes the



authoritative status of human knowledge. This is not to suggest that the accumulation of human knowledge carries no authority whatsoever with respect to cognitive orientation, or that the meaning-making power of human knowledge is null. Rather, the axiomatic point here is that because human knowledge participates ineluctably in the chaotic uncertainty of matter and is reliant on the mysterious spiritual moorings of matter, it cannot deliver an absolute, immutable understanding of anything.

Consideration has been given to the significance of mystery as it relates to the function of unpredictability in Yorùbá epistemology. Importantly, this consideration was informed by a previous analysis of the idea of materially-based relationality. Still in need of attention are the orienting concepts of the permanency of existential conflict and irresolution as well as the special relevance of these concepts to our analysis of the epistemological function of unpredictability as suggested in the Yorùbá originary narrative under discussion. This will now be addressed.

### The Permanency of Existential Conflict

As noted above, *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* work as the sculptor divinity casts light on the unpredictable dimension of matter and on the unpredictability of material engagement. The concept of the permanency of existential conflict uncovers yet another layer of meaning with regard to the function of unpredictability in Yorùbá epistemology. This concept is hardly foreign to Yorùbá cosmology. For the Yorùbá, the permanency of existential conflict is a central philosophical maxim that fundamentally influences the structure of Yorùbá thought. The permanency of existential conflict is ensconced in orally transmitted beliefs about the *Ajogun's* indefatigable war against humankind and the *Òrìṣà*. Concerning the significance of this idea in Yorùbá cosmology, Wándé Abímbólá (1994) states,

In the Yorùbá belief system, conflict rather than peace is the order of the day. Resolution can only be achieved through the offering of *ẹbọ* [sacrifice] via the intervention of *Èṣù* who is at the same time an *Òrìṣà* and a master of the *Ajogun*. But we must always remember that resolution is temporary. It is not, unlike conflict, a permanent feature of the universe<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos. *Dialogue and Alliance*, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 86, 1994. ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*. Roxbury, MA: AIM Books, 1997, p. 173. At a lecture given at Emory University in 2007, Professor Abímbólá restated this point in asserting that, for the Yorùbá, peace is merely an “aberration.” It is also important to be aware of significant differences between indigenous Yorùbá and Yorùbá diasporic perceptions of *ẹbọ* (sacrifice) and ritual practice. Abímbólá makes the following comments regarding these differences:



Abimbólá's emphasis on the focal philosophical position of conflict (*ija, rogbodyian*)<sup>45</sup> within the conceptual framework of Yorùbá cosmology provokes questions about the epistemological connection between unpredictability and existential conflict. Chief among these questions is the following: Can the Yorùbá concept of material unpredictability be understood as a re-inscription of the permanency of existential conflict?

I am not suggesting that the meaning of material unpredictability in Yorùbá epistemology is reducible to a re-inscription of the permanency of existential conflict. Yet deeply implicit in Yorùbá epistemology is the idea that the material world becomes meaningful in part through its unpredictable aspect. Unlike some conventional Western scientific epistemologies, the Yorùbá "world-sense" does not perceive the material world as a predictable, closed system. From a Yorùbá standpoint, it is impossible to know with unfailing precision how matter will behave from moment to moment. Equally inaccessible is exact knowledge of how individual and communal relationships with matter will change over time. Nevertheless, it is within this existential condition of relational entanglement with the unpredictable material world that human beings pursue well-being (*ayò àtí àláfíà*) and success (*ìyege*)<sup>46</sup>. Well-being and success are possible only through daily struggle amid the unremitting, often life-threatening unpredictability of matter.

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There is an over emphasis on blood in the Diaspora. The emphasis of the religion [Ifá] in the Diaspora is mainly on rituals, and on the visual aspects, such as beads and clothes. Little attention is paid to literature or philosophy. When the descendants of the Yorùbá in the Americas lost the literature they concentrated more on the visual and ritual aspects of the religion. In Africa, a *babaláwo* may have attended to 20 clients in a day without prescribing one animal or fowl. There are so many sacrifices we can do that don't involve blood at all. When we give food to Ògún, it may be prescribed that we give roasted yams or roasted corn. Occasionally a dog may be prescribed, but that may not happen often. When we give food to Qbátálá, we prepare *ìyan* (pounded yam), and *ègúsi* (a type of soup prepared with melon seeds). ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. **Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora**. Roxbury, MA: AIM Books, 1997, p. 84.

<sup>45</sup> During consultation with Nigerian-born Yorùbá speaker Olabisi Animashaun, I learned that the Yorùbá terms *ija* and *rogbodyian* may approximate the idea of conflict as a reality inhering within the structure of existence. However, she emphatically noted that the Yorùbá distinguish between different forms of conflict, and that there are several other Yorùbá terms that can be used to describe these forms.

<sup>46</sup> FAKINLEDE, Kayode J. **Well-Being**. Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary. New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003, p. 462; FAKINLEDE, Kayode J. **Success**. Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary. New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003, p. 413.

Here we perceive the philosophical link between material unpredictability and the permanency of existential conflict; just as matter frequently opposes the human struggle for well-being and success, this same struggle opposes the dangerous unpredictability of matter. The frequently harmful caprice involved in *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* molding of material human forms conflicts with the constructive goals for which many of these human forms will strive once given life by *Olódùmarè*. Stated otherwise, material unpredictability and human striving reciprocally create and preserve existential conflict. It is in this tensive sense that material unpredictability can be interpreted as a re-inscription of the permanency of existential conflict. Material unpredictability can also be interpreted in a manner underscoring its relevance to the concept of irresolution. It is to this concept that our analytical focus now shifts.

### **Irresolution**

The presence of irresolution in Yorùbá thought is made apparent by the above originary narrative's portrayal of *Olódùmarè* and *Òrìṣà-ńlá*. We have explored how the mystery surrounding *Olódùmarè's* commissioning of the solid earth is epistemologically meaningful. Ways in which this mystery points to the circumscription of human knowledge were also specified. Presently in need of investigation is this mysterious element's role in the condition of unpredictability manifest in the creative caprice of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*.

If *Olódùmarè's* purpose for matter remains unavailable to human knowledge, as our focal narrative suggests, then it stands to reason that the power to gain an unerringly predictive understanding of matter is also beyond the pale of human knowledge. By extension, if neither the purpose of matter nor complete foreknowledge of its activity from moment to moment are within the reach of human intellect, then it follows that the complexity of matter is never resolvable within any humanly contrived system of meaning. Hence the implicit idea in Yorùbá epistemology that human knowing is always circumscribed by the permanent condition of material irresolution. A vital function of human knowledge is to sharpen awareness of matter as a fundamentally irreducible reality whose deepest meanings frustrate the powers of human reason. Yorùbá epistemology makes possible the realization that at the level of material unpredictability, human knowledge is no knowledge at all. This realization throws human knowledge back onto itself, disabusing us of the presumption that human knowledge can have absolute authority. To be clear, I am not asserting that Yorùbá tradition looks unfavorably upon human intellectual activity

seeking to probe the greatest depths of material meaning. What I am asserting is that, in a Yorùbá purview, such probing must remain connected to the existential condition and needs of human communities.

The narrative of the creation of the solid earth and human beings is part of a larger tradition of Yorùbá originary narration including various documented and undocumented accounts. While access to the full range of these accounts is not possible, it is nonetheless important to consider multiple accounts so as to further enlarge our understanding of the meanings shaping Yorùbá epistemology. A goal of the preceding analysis was to establish that knowledge is understood in Yorùbá epistemology as a phenomenon marked by mystery, materially-based relationality, unpredictability, the permanency of existential conflict, and irresolution. The foregoing discussion of these ideas as equally important markers of Yorùbá thought provides broader conceptual context for the prominence of materially-based relationality and existential conflict in the originary narratives that follow. The next narrative to be explored is a popular variant of the first creation narrative treated earlier. The *Òrìṣà Odùduwà* (younger brother of *Òrìṣà-ńlá/Ọ̀bàtálá*) and *Ọ̀gún* (the deity of war and iron) both appear in this version<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kòlá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, pp. 120-121. Idowú makes the historical argument that the appearance of this variant is a result of the successful invasion of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* by a man named *Odùduwà* who worshipped a female divinity with the same name. Idowú explains that . . . *Odùduwà*, was therefore, without doubt, a divinity who belonged to the man *Odùduwà*. It was he who brought this divinity with her own cult to the land. For a period at least, the conflict went against *Òrìṣà-ńlá* and the *Ọ̀rẹ̀lúẹ̀rẹ̀* party; and that would mean that *Odùduwà* had prevailed over the indigenous divinity. As *Odùduwà* became established in the land, he would of course make people learn their revised article of belief, namely, that his own goddess was strongest and supreme; that it was she, and not *Òrìṣà-ńlá*, who created the earth. This must have gone down well with a goodsection of the people. Later generations who belonged to both worlds found it not impossible to accept both versions of the story about agent of creation and make a conflation of them. This conflation is the one now generally accepted as the orthodox story of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*: that it was indeed *Òrìṣà-ńlá* who got the commission from *Olódùmarè* but, through an accident, he forfeited the privilege to *Odùduwà* who thus became the actual creator of the solid earth. That this story is accepted without question today by the priests of *Òrìṣà-ńlá* is not strange: they also have the blood of *Odùduwà* in their veins. As a result of the conflation, there has taken place in some localities a kind of hybridisation between the cult of *Òrìṣà-ńlá* and that of *Odùduwà*, which often appears as if one has been superimposed upon the other. For example, *Igbó-Ọ̀rà* worships *Òrìṣà-ńlá* under the very transparent veneer of *Odùduwà*. One can easily discern the foundation cult to be that of *Òrìṣà-ńlá* and that the other one has been thinly spread over it. IDÒWÚ, Bólájí E. **Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief**. London: Longmans, 1962, p. 25.

## The Creation of “Dry Land” and the Covenant between Humankind and the Natural World

Like the previous creation narrative, this commonly known variant holds that in the primeval era the earth consisted almost entirely of water; small in number, the only extant landmasses were scattered mountains protruding from the water’s surface. Desiring to create “dry land,” *Olódùmarè* commissioned four hundred *Òrìṣà* to bring this dry land into existence. *Olódùmarè* provided each *Òrìṣà* with dust from *Ọrun*<sup>48</sup>, a chameleon, and a ten-toed hen to aid in the creation process. *Ọbàtálá* was specifically chosen by *Olódùmarè* as the leader of the four hundred commissioned *Òrìṣà* and was primarily responsible for the creation of the dry land. Assisted by an iron chain given to them by the deity *Ọgún*, the *Òrìṣà* traveled to *Ọkè-Àrà* (mountain of wonders)<sup>49</sup>, a location well within reach of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*.

While atop *Ọkè-Àrà*, *Ọbàtálá* became drunk on palm-wine and fell asleep. *Odùduwà*, his younger brother, took advantage of the situation by stealing special articles given to *Ọbàtálá* by *Olódùmarè*. *Odùduwà* then proceeded to scatter about sacred dust from *Ọrun*. Inexplicably, the strewn granules of dust began to solidify and form dry land. Next, *Odùduwà* released his ten-toed hen, and the hen scratched the newly-formed land, causing it to expand continuously in every direction. Finally, *Odùduwà*’s chameleon walked across the land and, with its feet, verified the land’s firmness.

After waking from his drunken sleep, *Ọbàtálá* discovered what his brother had done. *Odùduwà*’s opportunistic actions angered *Ọbàtálá*. Consequently, *Ọbàtálá* incited a fierce conflict with *Odùduwà*, which was highly unusual given *Ọbàtálá*’s reputation as a deity of “peace, order, and clean living”<sup>50</sup>. After observing this conflict, *Olódùmarè* intervened on behalf of *Odùduwà*, giving sanction to the initiative he demonstrated in creating the dry land. *Olódùmarè* acknowledged *Odùduwà*’s newly-acquired status as the creator of the earth. Concurrently, *Olódùmarè* also affirmed *Ọbàtálá*’s position as the eldest *Òrìṣà* while recommissioning him as the molder of human forms<sup>51</sup>. So ended the dispute between *Ọbàtálá* and *Odùduwà*. The site of the dry land’s creation and expansion is now known as *Ifẹ̀*. *Odùduwà* eventually became king of *Ifẹ̀* (*Ilé-Ifẹ̀*), holding

<sup>48</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kòlá. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 120.

<sup>49</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kòlá. *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 120.

<sup>50</sup> IDÒWÚ, Bólálá E. *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longmans, 1962, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> IDÒWÚ, Bólálá E. *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longmans, 1962, pp. 19, 21.

the title of *Olófin-Ayé* (lawgiver to the world)<sup>52</sup>. Many Yorùbá communities claim *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* as their ancestral home and identify *Odùduwà* as the progenitor of the Yorùbá people. The Yorùbá also regard *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* as the place from which all life on earth emerged<sup>53</sup>.

One may add to this account the following details from a fuller account appearing in chapter two of Wándé Abimbólá's *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*:

Vegetation later appeared on earth not by accident but by a deliberate design of Olódùmarè. A verse from Òtúá Ìrosùn, a minor Odù . . . of Ifá, explains how vegetation appeared on earth. This same chapter of Ifá tells us that each species of vegetation was asked to perform sacrifice before it left *òrun*. Those species which performed sacrifice are the ones which are respected, and are, therefore, not felled down indiscriminately. Those which did not perform sacrifice have been wantonly exploited and destroyed ever since.

Apart from the chicken and the chameleon, Olódùmarè also caused other species of animals to be sent to the earth. Altogether, 880 species each of animals, plants, and birds were originally sent to the earth. Their appearance on earth pre-dated the appearance of human beings, who were created as a result of a joint effort between Qbátálá and Ògún (the iron divinity) who supplied the skeleton, as well as Àjàlá [a “potter” in *Òrun*] who supplied the inner or spiritual head. Olódùmarè himself supplied the vital breath force known as Èmí, referred to by Ifá as a daughter of Olódùmarè.

All of these acts of creation were witnessed by Ifá, whose other name is Òrúnmìlà . . . It was Òrúnmìlà who gave each plant, animal or bird its own special name and identity. That is why Ifá is known as *ẹ̀lẹ̀rìí – ipín* (witness of destiny) *a – jẹ – ju – òògùn* (who is more effective than medicine).

When all the species of plants, animals and birds arrived on earth, a covenant was made which stipulated that no species should wantonly or greedily exploit the other. A similar covenant was also made with human beings . . . The verses of Ifá tell us that in those ancient times some animals and birds understood and spoke the languages of human beings and some humans also spoke and understood the languages of birds and

<sup>52</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kólá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 121.

<sup>53</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kólá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 121.

animals . . . In those ancient times, whenever human beings were celebrating important festivals, they invited animals and birds. Some trees had the ability to change themselves into human or animal form, and they too were cordially invited to human events. Those plants, animals, or birds left out of such great festivals felt insulted and sometimes found ways and means to sabotage or cause confusion on such occasions.

The ancient covenant between the plant kingdom, the animal kingdom and the human beings was finally broken in Ilé-Ifẹ̀. Several verses of Ifá tell us how this happened ... A wife of Ọ̀rúnmìlá, known as Pèrègúnlẹ̀lẹ̀, daughter of Awùjalẹ̀, was the first woman to give birth to twins. They were named Ẹ̀dun, the same which the Yorùbá gave to the colobus monkey.

But according to this verse of Ifá, it happened one day that Ọ̀lọ́fin, the priest-king of Ifẹ̀, was mysteriously lost in the forest. The male Ẹ̀dun saw him, rescued him, and brought him back to the city. Ọ̀lọ́fin then organized a big thanksgiving ceremony to mark his return to the city. He invited as usual all species of birds and animals. The animals made *erin*, the elephant, their leader. He was assisted by *ẹ̀fọ̀n*, the buffalo. But to the amazement of the animals, they were turned back one by one from the party. The elephant was the first to leave the party in anger . . . The buffalo, the antelope, [and] the duiker were all turned back like the elephant. But after some initial hesitation and doubt, Ẹ̀dun, the colobus monkey, was allowed to join the party and was eventually re-admitted into the society of human beings. He was placed among the Ifá priests who advise Ọ̀lọ́fin. But all the other animals who were turned back never returned . . . Thus it was human beings who broke the ancient covenant in Ilé-Ifẹ̀, leading to the separation of humans from the rest of creation. From that time until now there set in a relentless antagonism between humans and the environment<sup>54</sup>...

The notions of interconnectedness and conflict figure saliently in this account. The account describes a multidimensional, diverse community of being wherein relationship with the natural world is a primary means by which human existence gains intelligibility. The existence of the primordial human community and that of the natural world are so thoroughly

<sup>54</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*. Roxbury, MA: AIM Books, 1997, pp. 14-15, 18-19. A recent discussion with Yorùbá linguistic consultant Olabisi Animashaun revealed that in southwestern Nigeria, *Awùjalẹ̀* is a title commonly reserved for kings. Moreover, Animashaun stated that the meaning of the words *pèrègún* and *lẹ̀lẹ̀* may be relevant in determining the significance of the word *Pèrègúnlẹ̀lẹ̀*. The word *pèrègún* refers to a plant used by trained Yorùbá healers in the preparation of sacred medicines. The word *lẹ̀lẹ̀*, which means “slender” and/or “malleable,” accurately describes the size and flexible body of the *pèrègún*.

entwined that some humans possess the ability to speak bird and animal languages, and vice versa. Moreover, the depth of existential connection between the natural world and the primordial human community is such that trees can take on human form. These trees, along with birds and animals, are included in the affairs of the human world, so much so that they are invited to “important festivals.” This narrative bespeaks an understanding of human existence as a dynamic condition of communal relation with the assorted modes of life comprising the natural world. The world described in the narrative is a world in which human existence *is* material relation. But intrinsic to material existence is the reality of conflict.

We learn at the beginning of the narrative that *Òrun*, the source of material existence, is not without conflict. The defiant behavior of certain plant species in *Òrun* establishes *Òrun* as a site of conflict. According to *Odù Òtúá Ìrosùn*, some plant species failed to perform the requisite sacrifice prior to departing *Òrun*. These plants have since been the subject of exploitative violence. This non-compliance directly conflicted with the sacrificial expectations of *Òrun*. As a consequence of their non-compliance, the plants remain in conflict with beings in the material world wishing them harm. This primordial manifestation of antagonistic non-compliance set the stage for the development of existential conflict as an enduring condition of the material world, a condition for which further explanation is supplied later in the narrative.

This further explanation involves *Olófin*’s thanksgiving ceremony in *Ilé-Ifè*. For unclear reasons, the birds and other animals invited to this thanksgiving ceremony in celebration of *Olófin*’s return to *Ilé-Ifè* after being rescued from the forest by *Edun* were not permitted to attend. *Edun*, the colobus monkey, was permitted to attend and also was “eventually re-admitted into the society of human beings,” but only “after some initial hesitation and doubt” on the part of this society. The *human* decision to exclude birds and animals from *Olófin*’s thanksgiving ceremony violated the covenant between humans and the natural world, thereby creating a perduring, “antagonistic” rift between the two. This exclusionary decision introduced a new level of conflict within the realm of material existence.

From a broad social perspective, this decision precipitated a structural shift in material relations characterized by oppositional movement away from cooperation. The significance of this relational shift is apparent upon considering that the human condition and the natural world both gain a certain intelligibility when understood according to an epistemology of conflict. In this epistemology, the human condition and the natural world are knowable as tensive domains of existence struggling against one



another for survival and well-being. However, the perdurance of conflict between these two domains does not necessitate total isolation, nor does it eliminate the possibility of future cooperation. The existential interconnection of the human and natural worlds as spheres of materiality remains. Abimbólá's discussion is helpful here:

Even though the ancient covenant between man and the rest of creation was broken in Ilé-Ifẹ̀, vestiges of the covenant have survived, yielding a profound respect for nature among the Yorùbá even today. In the Ifá sacred literature itself, every creature or object of nature is personified. When Ifá speaks of a tree, an insect, a bird or an animal, it speaks of it as if it were human. For example, several birds, such as *igún* (the vulture), *agbe* (the blue turacoo), *àlùkò* (the red feathered turacoo), and *àgbìghòniwònrán*, are regarded as priests of Ifá in the Ifá literary corpus. *Èèsún*, giant grass of the forest, is the Ifá priest of the forest while *mèrùwà*, giant grass of the savanna, is the Ifá priest of savanna lands. *Irínmòdò*, a huge and very tall tree of river basins, is a wife of Òrúnmìlà himself. A verse of Ifá speaks of *Irínmòdò* as follows:

Ifá ló firínmòdò jòba.  
 Ifá ló firínmòdò jòba.  
 Òrúnmìlà ló gbé Irínmòdò níyàwó.  
 Ifá ló firínmòdò jòba.

It was Ifá who made Irínmòdò a potentate.  
 It was Ifá who made Irínmòdò a potentate.  
 It was Òrúnmìlà who wedded Irínmòdò as a wife.  
 It was Ifá who made Irínmòdò a potentate<sup>55</sup>.

Abimbólá's translation illustrates one way the *Ifá* corpus construes the human and natural worlds as cooperatively bound together, despite the covenantal breach. And yet, the tension introduced by this breach renders the connection between these two worlds conflictual. Reductive interpretations of Yorùbá cosmology describing the material world either as a domain of cooperation or as a domain of conflict are therefore impugned. The tensive multidimensionality of meanings found within the originary narrative to which the above verse relates reflects meanings present in other narratives as well. One such narrative features *Igbá Ìwà* (the gourd of existence), *Olódùmarè*, the *Òrìṣà Ilè*, and a bush rat.

<sup>55</sup> ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*. Roxbury, MA: AIM Books, 1997, pp. 21-22.

## **Olódùmarè, Ilè, and the Bush Rat**

It is said that during the primordial era both halves of *Igbá Ìwà* existed together in union; the top half of *Igbá Ìwà* (*Àjàlórùn*, male spirit-world) was ruled by *Olódùmarè*, while *Ilè* ruled the bottom half (*Àjàláyé*, female earth)<sup>56</sup>. One day, *Olódùmarè* and *Ilè* went hunting together for bush rats in a forest of *Àjàláyé*. After catching only one bush rat, the two began to argue over who should keep the rat. *Ilè* contended that her seniority and the rat's presence in her jurisdiction granted her exclusive right to the rat. In response, *Olódùmarè* eventually relinquished the rat. However, *Olódùmarè*'s decision resulted in the sundering of *Igbá Ìwà*. The sudden disconnection between the two halves of *Igbá Ìwà* caused the sky to cease producing rain, and *Àjàláyé* (earth) suffered. Upon witnessing this suffering, *Ilè* was compelled to recognize *Olódùmarè* as the chief cosmic authority. It was in this way that the balance of life on *Àjàláyé* was restored<sup>57</sup>.

*Ilè*'s contentious claim of seniority is puzzling in light of *Olódùmarè*'s status in other narratives as the original creative impetus behind the existence of *Àjàláyé*. As Lawal suggests, the meaning of *Ilè*'s claim gains some clarity when examined in the context of other Yorùbá originary narratives viewing *Odùduwà* as the "Supreme Goddess" and as an "embodiment" of *Òrun* and *Ayé*<sup>58</sup>. Consider, for instance, the following point made by Lucas:

In the early myths she [*Odùduwà*] is credited with the priority of existence . . . She is regarded as having independent existence, and as co-eval with *Olórùn* [*Olódùmarè*], the Supreme Deity with whom she is associated in the work of creation . . . *Odùduwà* is known as *Ìyá Agbè* – 'Mother of the Gourd' or 'Mother of the closed calabash.' She is represented in a sitting posture, nursing a child. Hence prayers are often addressed to her by would-be mothers<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> LUCAS, J. O. **The Religion of the Yorùbás**. Lagos: CMS Bookshop, 1948, p. 45. Also, many Yorùbá believe that the three *Òrìṣà* known widely as *Èṣù* (a uniquely powerful *Òrìṣà* who mediates between the human and spiritual worlds, and between other beings within the spiritual world), *Obàtálá*, and *Ifá* have always existed alongside *Olódùmarè*. ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kólá. **Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account**. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, pp. 51-52.

One of Lawal's interviewees, Yorùbá elder D. O. Epega, goes a step further than Lucas, stating that "Odùduà is the Self-Existent Being who created existence. He is both male and female . . . The word Olódùmarè is a praise title of Odùduà"<sup>60</sup>. Moreover, Yorùbá scholars Idòwú and Bámgbòšé lend etymological credence to the points made by Lucas and Epega in noting the occurrence of the word *odu* (chief) in the titles *Olódùmarè* and *Odùduwà*<sup>61</sup>. This observation raises the possibility that both appellations designate the same deity. Lawal makes a similar linguistic observation concerning *Olódùmarè* and *Odùduwà*: "Indeed, Olódùmarè is also known as Elédùwà, which recalls the *duwa* in Odù-*duwà*. Thus the narrative attributing the creation of the terrestrial world to Odùduwà may very well reflect a divine act of self-extension, identifying Olódùmarè as a sexually biune Supreme Deity"<sup>62</sup>. The case of *Olódùmarè* and *Odùduwà* as indirectly raised by *Ilè*'s conflictual challenge of *Olódùmarè*'s authority is a prime example not only of the tensively complex relational structures of meaning inhering within Yorùbá oral culture, but also of the multivalent linguo-conceptual construction of deities found in Yorùbá cosmology. My point is that this tradition of constructing deities through a combination of intricate relational conceptualization and oral theo-philosophical discourse is an *epistemological* tradition that contributes substantially to knowledge production in Yorùbá society.

Our purpose in analyzing the narrative of *Olódùmarè*, *Ilè*, and the Bush Rat, as well as the earlier three narratives, does not entail resolving debates about the fine details of these accounts, or settling apparent inconsistencies. The purpose, instead, is to shed light on the role these originary accounts play in providing some of the conceptual tools with which Yorùbá modes of apprehension are crafted. Put in other terms, the focus is not on establishing narrative authority toward the objective of upholding a static cultural canon. The focus is on delineating explicit and implicit content in Yorùbá originary narration that enables discrete vectors of knowing.

<sup>60</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.

<sup>61</sup> IDÒWÚ, Bóláji E. *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*. London: Longmans, 1962, pp. 22-27, 31-32. BÁMGBOŠÉ, Ayọ. The Meaning of Olódùmarè: An Etymology of the Name of the Yorùbá High God. **African Notes: Bulletin of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan**, v. 7, no. 1, pp. 28-29, 1972.

<sup>62</sup> LAWAL, Babatunde. Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. **African Arts**, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.

## Conclusion

Motivating this essay is an interest in employing phenomenological analysis to explore several Yorùbá originary narratives not as cultural artifacts to be cast aside as outmoded myth but as dynamic sources of knowledge production anchoring a compelling epistemological perspective. Over the course of the analysis, particular attention was given to five orienting concepts detectable in these narratives: mystery, materially-based relationality, unpredictability, the permanency of existential conflict, and irresolution. It was also suggested that these concepts represent key markers of Yorùbá thought. The analysis yielded a range of insights appertaining to Yorùbá epistemology. Some principal ones include the following:

- The universe is an environment wherein human meaning is at every stage rooted in the generative entanglement of the spiritual and material dimensions.
- Yorùbá epistemology indicates that a vital function of human knowledge involves sharpening awareness of matter as a fundamentally irreducible reality whose deepest meanings frustrate the powers of human reason.
- In a Yorùbá perspective, matter emerges not as inert stuff but as a reconfigurable vessel of spiritual power that, by way of engagement, yields knowledge about the physical world as an environment shaped by profound creative potential and flux.
- The function of *Ifá didá* (the Yorùbá divinatory process) is instructive because it facilitates an awareness of the role of Yorùbá cosmology in the construction of knowledge.
- The multivalent linguistic construction of deities in Yorùbá cosmology via a combination of intricate relational conceptualization and oral theo-philosophical discourse is an *epistemological* tradition.

Undoubtedly, these insights imply other trajectories yet to be explored.

It may not be possible to calculate with any precision the age of the various originary narratives engaged throughout this essay. Some are likely older than others. However, heeding Oyěwùmí's warning, I have avoided arguing for the "timelessness" of these accounts. This is not to suggest they lack contemporary relevance. The vigorous, continuing presence of Yorùbá-based cultural traditions found in northeastern Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, North America, and elsewhere belies such a suggestion. Yet what must be borne in mind is the structural dynamism of Yorùbá cosmology as

a tradition of thought. In short, Yorùbá epistemology is a *living* organism with inveterate roots, and should be studied accordingly<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> In a discussion of problematic trends in academic discourses produced by Western scholars in the field of Yorùbá studies, Oyěwùmí writes of these scholars that they “have assumed that present-day ‘customs’ . . . they encounter are always rooted in ancient traditions. I suggest that their timelessness should not be taken for granted; some of them are ‘new traditions.’” OYĚWÙMÍ, Oyèrónkẹ. **The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses**. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. xv.