

A Kabbalistic Perspective on the Yoruba African Tradition

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Introduction

I was brought up in Trinidad and Tobago in the West Indies as a good Roman Catholic where any association with 'strange' religions or beliefs was frowned upon. One day my father came home and mentioned that he had been to a "Sango" ritual. (Sango is one of the deities in the Yoruba pantheon.) Although this excited my curiosity at the time, my interest in African religion lay dormant for many years.

I was sent to England to continue my education and was introduced to Kabbalah by a friend. Subsequently as a student of Kabbalah, I decided to look at African religious beliefs for universal principles. Because of my memory of Sango I decided to look at the Yoruba tradition in some detail. (The Yorubas live in the South West of Nigeria in West Africa.)

One of the problems in researching African religious traditions is that most of the texts have been written by Europeans. Very few texts on religions have been written by African scholars and even fewer by practising exponents or priests of a particular tradition.

The text which I found invaluable was written by a practising Ifa priest, C. Osamaro Ibie - The Complete works of Orunmila - The Divinity of Wisdom. Ifa encompasses the "revelation, way of life and religion taught by Orunmila....This knowledge is endless, ageless and eternal."

Orunmila is the youngest of the Divinities created by Olodumare (God). He knows the secrets of Olodumare. The author tells us that, "This work was embarked upon at the insistence of Orunmila who expressed undisguised anxiety for his followers to know more about him". It reveals the true account of life both in heaven and on earth.

God's Decision to Create

Orunmila has revealed that Olodumare created all the Divinities to assist him in the management of the planetary system and that they all owe total allegiance to him. The Divinities all have free will, up to a point, and regard themselves as servants of Olodumare sent by Olodumare into the world to help him make the world a more liveable place for mortals so that through them, the Divinities, man may be able to appreciate how Olodumare loves his creatures.

In Kabbalah we are told that the reason for existence coming into Being is that God wished to behold God. There then followed a process of unfoldment which culminated with the Kabbalistic model of the Tree of Life with its four worlds.

In the Yoruba tradition there is no such obvious unfoldment. First there was Olodumare. Olodumare then decided to create his servants and it was so - 200 lower Divinities were created. They were the first inhabitants of heaven and they all "lived normal lives in heaven, each in the image which took after Oludumare own."

Later Oludumare decided to create man and he sent one of his favourite divinities, Death to fetch the clay with which man's image was to be moulded after those of the Divinities. Oludumare then cast the human image in clay and told all the Divinities to close their eyes. All the Divinities did as instructed except Orunmila who was peeking. Olodumare caught Orunmila and as he shut his eyes. Oludumare told him to keep them open since nothing spectacular was ever done without a living witness. That is why today another name for Orunmila is Eleri Ukpın or Eleri Orisa meaning God's own witness.

As Kabbalists we note:

- There is God (Oludumare).
- God lives in Heaven.
- God wills to create.
- God creates the Divinities with both passive and expansive qualities in His own image.
- All owe total allegiance to Him.
- God chooses to create humankind in His image.
- Death, one of God's favourite creations, fetches clay.
- God forms man and breathes life into him.

The story continues:

Following the creation of man, Oludumare decides to "carve out the earth". Man was considered too young and inexperienced to found this new abode, so the Divinities were sent to establish earth with their knowledge, experience and discretion.

After creating man, heaven was becoming too populated so Olodumare decided to send the Divinities to Earth to "form it". Olodumare then decides to become pure Spirit, only connectable through Spirit. To the Kabbalist, a separation is taking place. God is moving out of Creation into Azilut and beyond, connectable through Spirit and physical earth is being formed. It is interesting to note the injunctions placed on the Divinities with regard to the establishment of Earth.

- No one is to take advantage of Oludumare's physical absence. They must always show respect for Him.
- The golden rule must be adhered to. That is to say. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The First Attempt to Establish Life on Earth

Olodumare sends Arugba, his maid, (messenger, the feminine principle) to inform the Divinities that they are to report to him in order to go on a mission. Orunmila who practices divination every day is told to prepare a special meal for a visitor. Arugba visits all the Divinities in order of seniority and delivers her message. When she reaches Orunmila's house, the last one, he invites her to a meal and because of his hospitality she confides in him Oludumare's plan. She advises him that when he goes before Olodumare he should ask for four things: the chameleon; the multi-coloured hen and God's Divine bag, Arugba.

Orunmila goes before Olodumare and his four wishes are granted. He puts into the Divine bag a snails shell, Arugba, the chameleon and chicken plus a sample of all the plants and animals he can lay his hands on. Note that the Divine bag had the capacity of accommodating anything, no matter what the size and also could produce whatever was required of it. (Could this be Da'at?)

All Divinities leave for Earth via the Palm Tree which has roots in heaven and its branches spread over water below. (An inverted Tree of Life) The Divinities cannot go any further. Orunmila, the youngest, leaves heaven last and meets his brethren on the branches. He too waits. Arugba then calls to him from within the bag and tells him to turn the snails shell downward towards the water for within it is the foundation (yesod) soil for Earth. He does as instructed.

The water below begins to bubble and within a short space of time heaps of sand begin piling up around the branches of the Palm Tree. After many heaps are formed, Arugba again calls to him and advises him to drop the hen down. The hen sets to work scattering the heaps and after a large area of ground is spread Arugba calls to him to set the chameleon free to test the solidity of the earth. This Orunmila does and the chameleon walks on the earth proving its firmness.

Note - Orunmila is then the first Divinity on the earth. The Palm Tree is considered the first creation. It has its roots in heaven and is respected by all Divinities. It is the root of their genealogy. All Divinities spread out from the Palm Tree to

establish their homes in different parts of the earth.

The Beginning of Conflict on Earth

Orunmila, being the youngest of all the Divinities stayed with and served all of his more senior brethren which were Ogun - the Divinity of Engineering; Sango - the Spirit of Lightening; Olokun - Spirit of the Bottom of the Ocean.

The presence of Arugba as the only woman created many problems for the Divinities. They fought over her and it brought out the worst in them. There was confusion and this led to acrimony. Orunmila left earth to return to heaven to complain to Olodumare. Olodumare sends Elenini or Obstacle to earth to verify Orunmila's story. This he does.

The Return of the Divinities to Heaven

After Orunmila's departure, the Divinities refused to co-operate with each other. "Life became intolerable as there was no medium for commercial exchange". (This point puzzled me until I realised that Orunmila provided service amongst the Divinities and with him gone, an agency or mechanism for service was required, hence money.)

The Divinities go back to heaven and ask God for money to do business with each other, Ase or Divine authority with which they could cause things to happen and for mortal servants. God grants their wishes.

When God sent money into the world, Orunmila was the only Divinity to "conquer" it. His older brothers were envious and resorted to open aggression to destroy him.

There was complete pandemonium on earth over the sharing of money and news got back to Heaven about the commotion. God dispatches Death to bring back the perpetrators, but He only succeeds in removing the followers of the Divinities.

Olodumare then sent Elenini into the world to "come and finish them up". He was given the instruction to bring all the Divinities back to Heaven. He starts with the most senior of Divinities, Ogun, and turns him into a leaf and does the same with all the other Divinities. Then finally he comes to Orunmila.

Orunmila through divination is told about a powerful visitor and he prepares a huge feast and procession for Elenini. On his arrival, Elenini is feted and he is moved by the hospitality. He comments that if all the Divinities were as magnanimous as Orunmila, earth would be a wonderful place.

He gives the bag containing all the Divinities to Orunmila and proclaimed that from then on he was to have authority over all of them. As soon as Orunmila freed them they went back to their old ways. News of these atrocities reached Heaven and Olodumare decides to personally intervene. Orunmila is told in a dream that he and his followers are to climb up the sacred Palm Tree to

Heaven. As soon as this was done Olodumare released the dike holding rain in the sky and the ensuing downpour of rain flooded and consumed the world. So ended the first attempt to establish life on earth.

This Ifa account of creation though differing in detail from the creation myths with which we may be more familiar, i.e., Genesis, or Norse and Greek mythology, has enough points of principle that are identical:

- The Supreme God
- A Tree of Life
- Divine Image
- Idea of Form and Force
- Four Worlds

- Creation through the Will of God
- A heavenly hierarchy
- As Above, so Below
- The Flood
- A new beginning

The Ifa teaching is consistent with universal wisdom. The means whereby mankind learns of its true nature and heritage. Different lands and diverse cultures shape the form and detail but the true unalterable content remains the same.

Note

One of the Divinities who did not figure prominently in the first attempt to establish life on earth but to whom all Divinities pay allegiance is Esu. Esu's role is to test man's sincerity. He reports regularly to Olodumare on the deeds of Divinities and mankind and is a good friend of Orunmila. Esu is the bringer of retribution and has power of Life and Death over humans and can cause calamity to Divinities who do not acknowledge him and offer sacrifice.

Esu plays a major role in the second attempt to establish life on earth

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