

Overarching Features of the Book

Each chapter will begin with either an appropriate phrase from a ẹṣẹ Ifá (divinatory poem) or a proverb (òwe). The Yorùbá have a very high regard for proverbs. It is said, “A proverb is the horse upon which an idea swiftly rides.”

Because I am one of a small group of African American Alá Aganjús¹ in the growing number of African Americans who are choosing to practice an Òrìṣà religious tradition, I discuss Yorùbá religious rituals practiced by enslaved African Americans that survived the Middle Passage, and practices and songs sung by enslaved African Americans that went on to be incorporated into current mainstream American culture. Since I am also one of an even smaller group of women called Ìyánifá (literally, mother of Ifá),² the changing and important role of women will also be included where appropriate, particularly with regard to ancestor and Òrìṣà rituals, and divination and initiation practices.

In Chapter 1, I introduce the fundamental principles, or ̀ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀ (primordial entities): Eégún (Ancestors), Orí (destiny), Ikin Ifá (consecrated palm nuts),³ Òlodùmaré (The Supremely Important Being), and the Òrìṣà who are the roots underlying the Yorùbá and Lùkùmí religions.⁴ Where appropriate, I have included an itàn (story) about Aganjú that links him to a fundamental principle. The preceding fundamental principles also form the core of such African Diaspora religions and Òrìṣà traditions as Candomble⁵ in Brazil, Lùkùmí in Cuba, Vodun⁶ in Haiti, and Voodoo and Hoodoo⁷ in the United States. These same principles are also at the heart of many of the rituals, concepts, poems, and stories that are mentioned in subsequent chapters regarding Aganjú.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the important relationship between Aganjú, Ọya, and Eégún (ancestors). This is very significant, in that ancestral veneration is a key aspect of all branches of the Òrìṣà traditions. Reasons will also be suggested for why the Lùkùmí may have associated Aganjú, Ọya, and Egúngún with the number 9 and the Ifá Odú Ọsá Méjì⁸ that symbolizes change or transition. Examples of change are also provided in Chapter 2

that suggest the exclusive performance of some ancestral and divination rituals by men were, according to Ifá poems, historically created and performed by women.

In Chapter 3, the significance of Eégún or Egúngún (Ancestor) veneration is discussed in detail. This section covers the importance of cloth in both Yorùbá and Lùkùmí ancestral rituals. I end this chapter with a story I collected in Ìbàdàn, Nigeria that serves to remind us of the close association between Aganjú, Şàngó, and Eégún. In Chapter 4, I provide examples of Yorùbá ancestral masking traditions, as well as the preservation of West African dance, songs, and parade customs that were practiced and preserved by enslaved African Americans. Chapter 5 provides the reader with the various meanings and importance of the orí (literally, head) to the Òrìşà traditions. Although Òbàtálá is considered the Òrìşà who is the owner (ruler) and maker of the external human head, I provide an oríkì (praise poem) that I collected in Nigeria that speaks of the Òrìşà Aganjú as having the ability to make heads as well as Òbàtálá. Even more astonishing is that Aganjú's ability to "make heads" is also revealed in a Lùkùmí story recorded by the famed anthropologist Lydia Cabrera. In Chapter 6, Ikin Ifá (Palm nuts), the sacred divination tool cast to tell the events of yesterday, today, and tomorrow is discussed, as is the estimated age of the current Ifá system of divination, to provide a historical context with respect to other religions. Additionally, although the Ikin Ifá are most frequently connected today to Òrúnmìla (the male Òrìşà associated with Ifá and wisdom), I provide in this section other stories that speak of the powerful female Òrìşà Odù and Òşun, and the Vodun Gbádù, as the first possessors of "wisdom," or the knowledge of divination. Over the last 25 years, the initiation of women into the priesthood of Ifá has been the subject of hotly contentious debate. Many Lùkùmí Babaláwo (male priests of Ifá) believe the initiation of women to Ifá is a heretical abomination. Although the initiation of women to Ifá is common today in Nigeria, many Lùkùmí have argued that female priests of Ifá, currently called "Ìyánifá," are a fabricated phenomenon that historically did not exist. However, to the contrary, I provide a picture of an Òyó, Nigerian women divining on Òşẹ Ifá (a five-day sacrificial ritual to Ifá) in the mid-1800s. I also include a photograph of a woman referred to as a "female Babaláwo," circa 1960, casting an Ifá divination chain. These pictures support the fact that

historically there were women participating in Ifá rituals and that there were female priests of Ifá in Yorùbáland.

In Chapter 7, I discuss Òlódùmarè, whom contemporary Yorùbá and Lùkùmí religious practitioners consider “God” the creator. I provide material to show that although Òlódùmarè is of Supreme importance to Òrìṣà practitioners, Òlódùmarè is most probably not the “Supreme Being.”

In Chapter 8, I have included Lùkùmí and Yorùbá òrò pàtaki (in this context, oral histories) passed down about Aganjú as Irunmalé (fieriest force of nature), Òrìṣà, and Aṣaájú Sòdi Òrìṣà (deified ancestor). In Chapter 9, I provide another layer of understanding of an oríkì (praise poem) for Aganjú that I collected while in Iṣeyín, Nigeria, in addition to Lùkùmí oríkì ṣokí (one-word or short praise names), orin (songs), and itàn (stories).

Both Yorùbá and Lùkùmí Òrìṣà practitioners employ wooden and metal symbolic objects, called “herramientas” (tools) by the Lùkùmí, and ìbọ (that which is offered sacrifice) by Nigerian devotees. There are herramientas for Aganjú that are kept inside of his sacred vessel with other consecrated objects, and thereby hidden from the view of the uninitiated; other objects, such as crowns, axes, and swords are kept outside of his sacred vessel. In Chapter 10, I provide information on those tools that are kept outside of Aganjú’s sacred vessel by Lùkùmí and Yorùbá religious practitioners.

In Chapter 11, I briefly cover Lùkùmí and Yorùbá Aganjú initiation practices. Lastly, in Chapter 12, I provide the reader with several other itans (stories) that illustrate Aganjú’s important relationships to other such major Òrìṣà as Ọbàtálá, Ṣàngó, Ọṣún, Yemọṣja, Ọbalúaiyé, and Odùdúwà.

END NOTES

¹Alá Aganjú refers to an individual who has been initiated as a priest of Aganjú in the Lùkùmí religion.

²Although Mother of Ifá is the literal translation, “Mother of Wisdom” is a more accurate English description. In subsequent chapters, I discuss “Wisdom” and provide stories that show that women throughout history have been the keepers of “Wisdom.”

³Ikin Ifá are the sacred sixteen palm nuts used by an Ifá priest to perform divination.

⁴Of late, some Yorùbá practitioners have also referred to their traditional religion as ̀ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀.

⁵Candomble (pronounced: Can-dome-blay), is an Afro-Brazilian religion developed primarily by enslaved Yorùbás and their descendants in northeastern Brazil. There are at least three major types of Candomble in Brazil that are associated with nations or the following African ethnic groups: the Gégé-Nago, the Angola-Congo Candombles, and the Candombles de Caboclo. The first is based on Yorùbá and Fon religious traditions and their languages, while the other two are based on diverse Bantu and other native Brazilian sources. The term Bantu is used to describe approximately two-thirds of the people who reside in Africa, who have a common linguistic and genetic heritage.

⁶Vodou (pronounced: Voh-do), is a religion developed and practiced by enslaved Africans in Haiti. Vodou has been recognized in Haiti’s constitution as the country’s national religion since 1987. There is also Louisiana Voodoo or New Orleans Voodoo, which is a set of spiritual folkways that originated from the traditions of Africans in the Diaspora, and a cultural form of the Afro-American religions developed by enslaved West Africans.

⁷The term “hoodoo” has been used since the 19th century to describe the traditions of African American folkloric magic. Some writers have said it is a corruption of the word voodoo. Still others posit that it is not a corruption of voodoo because both terms coexisted in Louisiana and meant two different things. Hoodoo consists of a large body of African folkloric magic, a considerable amount of Native American botanical knowledge, and European folklore. Although most practitioners of hoodoo are African American, hoodoo also has a history of white American practitioners. The hoodoo tradition emphasizes personal magical power and does not have strong links to a specific form of theology or religion. Although individual practitioners take on students, hoodoo does not have a hierarchical structure of priests or priestesses. Practitioners of hoodoo are called by the same name, as well as “root doctor,” “root worker,” hoodoo woman/man,” or two-headed woman/man.” With regard to African spiritual forces, hoodoos are most inclined to utilize the assistance of the Yorùbá deity known as Èṣú, Èṣú-élegbára, or Legba, by the Fon. In hoodoo, Èṣú is called the “dark man” or “black man” that one meets at the crossroad. Embedded in the crossroad magic of hoodoo are remnants of the beliefs of the Yorùbá, Fon, and Bakongo peoples of West Africa.

⁸The Odú (womb/container of wisdom) Ọ̀sá Méjì is one of 256 in the Ifá system of divination that is associated in one form or another with all the Ọ̀rìṣà-related religions.