

COSMIC TIME AND INDIVIDUAL IN YORUBA THOUGHT AND LIFE *

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I. THE YORUBA – THEIR ORIGINS

The Yoruba, considered one of the most developed groups of the West Africa, have a long history whose beginning took place in *Ile-Ife*, where, according their traditions, the creation of the world occurred. The ancestor of all Yoruba, and father of all their dynasties was *Oduduwa* (*Odu ti o da wa*, “The Chief who created the being”). The wife of *Oduwa* was *Omonide*, who gave him seven children, two daughters and five sons. Afterwards, their sons and grandsons spread throughout the world, founding cities and becoming kings.

Descriptions of *Oduduwa* similar to the above one, due to Johnson¹, are found in several authors. Other traditions, however, refer to *Oduduwa* as the deified representation of *Iya-mi*, the ancestor mother and the feminine principle from where everything originates². In fact, *Oduduwa* is accepted as a god or as a goddess,

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(1) JOHNSON, S. *The history of the Yoruba from the Earliest Times to Beggining of the British Protectorate*. Routledge, 1921.

(2) ELBEIN DOS SANTOS, J. *Os Nago e a Morte: Pade, Asese e o Culto de Egun na Bahia*. Petropolis, Vozes, 1986.

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depending on the locality of Yorubaland. In Ado, for instance, *Oduduwa* is indisputably a goddess. However, the male conception of *Oduduwa* predominates among the Yoruba. A good example of *Oduduwa* as a god is his representation as a strong and imposing man in the Royal Palace at Ile-Ife. It must be observed here that it is almost in Ile-Ife alone that the male-divinity cult is strong. In most other places, *Oduduwa* is regarded as an ancestor and not as a divinity.

The Yoruba are believed to have come originally from the Upper Nile and, travelling westwards across the Great Savanna of Sudan, have reached Nigeria³. Later, they have advanced southward and settled in the forest, where they have established several kingdoms under the rule of a supreme chief – the Alafin of Oyo. Like the early history of most nations, the origin of the Yoruba is involved in obscurity. In these primeval times, historical facts are hardly distinguishable from legendary accounts, and the early history of mankind is to be derived from a cosmogony which explains the origin of the world and of man.

2. THE YORUBA COSMOGONY⁴

According to Idowa, E. B.⁵, in the beginning, *Olodumare*, the Supreme Deity, and a number of divinities, among which Orisa-nla, Orunmila, and Esu abode *Orun*, the heaven. What is now our earth was then a watery waste, ruled by Olukun, the god of the sea.

Olodumare thought: this infinite and monotonous extension of water should be inhabited by divinities and other living beings. He then conceived the idea of creating the solid earth from a portion of the watery extension. He summoned Orisa-nla, the arch-divinity, to his presence and charged him with the duty. He gave him a snail shell with loose earth, five-toed hen and a pigeon.

When Orisa-nla 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. When a great portion of the waste had been covered, Orisa-nla went back and reported to Olodumare that the work had been accomplished. Whereupon, Olodumare dispatched the chamaleon to go down and inspect what had been done. From the first visit, the chamaleon took

(3) PERKINS, W.A. & STEMBRIDGE, J.H. *Nigeria, A descriptive geography*. Ibadan, Oxford University Press, 1957.

(4) IDOWU, E. B. *Oldumare – God in Yoruba Belief*. Longmans of London, 1962, p.37.

(5) IDOWU, E.B. *Oldumare – God in Yoruba Belief*. Longmans of London, 1962.

the report that the earth was wide enough, but not sufficiently dry; from the second visit, it returned with the report that the earth was both wide enough and sufficiently dry.

The creation of the earth was completed in four days; the fifth day was therefore set apart for the worship of the Deity. When Olodumare was satisfied that the work had indeed been accomplished. He sent Orisa-nla back to equip the earth. This time. He sent Orunmila to accompany him and to be his counsellor. To Orisa-nla, Olodumare handed trees to be planted and propagated. The original hen and pigeon which have spread the loose earth should now increase and multiply and provide meat for the dwellers on 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 Orisa-nla appealed to Olodumare and, as a result, rain to fall upon the earth.

Orisa-nla was assigned another special job. He was made the sculptor of human bodies for the future. But the right to give life Olodumare reserved to Himself alone for ever. The instruction given to Orisa-nla was that when he had completed his part in the creation of man, he should lock up the lifeless forms in a room and leave the place. Olodumare then come and give breath, thus completing the creation of the human being. Once, Orisa-nla tried to see Olodumare giving life to the human forms. One day, when he completed his work, instead of locking up the forms and leaving the place, he locked himself with them and hid on a corner. Olodumare, however, put him into a deep sleep from which he awoke only when all the forms had become human beings.

In the beginning, everyone could have to heaven and back as he wished and all could have immediate, direct contact with Olodumare. The heaven was very near the earth, so near that one could stretch up one's hand and touch it. Then something happened, and a huge gap appeared between heaven and earth. One story is told that a greedy person helped himself to too much food from heaven; another that a woman with a dirty hand touched the unsoiled face of the heaven. Since then, the privilege of free intercourse, of man taking the fruits of heaven as he liked disappeared.

3. THE ORISA

Other consequence of the man's "fall" is that the mediatorial status of the orisa, the ministers of Olodumare, has been considerably enhanced, which then would be indispensable for the maintenance of man's ties with the heaven. As seen

above, by the Supreme Deity, Olodumare, a series of primordial divinities abode in the heaven: Orisa-nla, the arch-divinity in Yorubaland, deputy of Olodumare on earth is His creative and executive functions: Orunmila, deputy in matters pertaining to omniscience and wisdom, the creator of the Odu corpus, whose consult through the divination system of Ifa reveals the destiny of the orisa and of the man: Esu, the inspector of the worships and of the sacrifices, the first orisa to be addressed during the performing of a ritual.

Every man is more closely linked to one or more orisa, and is said to be “child” of that orisa. The intire universe, extending from the sky to the earth and waters is populated by numerous orisa, to whom the Yoruba are brought into a very personal relationship. One often meet a devotee who feels himself so close to the orisa from whom he is “child”, that the addresses conversations to him at any time and in any place, just as a person talks to someone with whom he is sitting face to face or side by side.

Among the orisa, a special place is reserved to those who rule the metereological phenomena. In the qualification of the time by the Yoruba, the sudden variations of wheather are of great importance, since in Yorubaland, the annual cycle is not marked out by the smooth cold-warm transition, but by the dryness-rain discontinuity. After the dry season, which extends from November to April, the rainy season, which is anxiously waited, is inaugurated by tempestuous storms. Hence the high rank of Sango, the divinity of the thunderbolt and lightning. Sango is considered the manifestation of “The Wrath” of Olodumare against all kinds of wickedness. The main offences are lying, stealing and poisoning. In

The flashing of the lighting fire

The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks.

the Yoruba sees the revelation of “The Wrath”; they experience in a palpable way the “numinous awe” in religion. The Yoruba have a keen sense of “The Wrath”, so that when it lightens or thunders, people – specially those who are not sure of their character – tremble. The salute the “The Wrath” as Ogirigiri, Ekun a-s-eke – “*The terrible rumbling One, the Leopard that devours the liar*”. It is said when it lightens On'-imu ns'imu, eke nsa – “*The owner of the nose turns up the nose, the liar trembles*”⁶.

On the other hand, it is told of Sango that he was a king, whom, after his death, ascended to heaven; the lightning and the resulting calamities were the vengeance which Sango originally sent upon his opponents. Its seems that some at-

(6) IDOWU, E.B. *Oldumare – God in Yoruba Belief*. Longmans of London, 1962, p.93.

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tributes of Sango were borrowed from an earlier Yoruba solar divinity, to whom lightning and thunder have been attributed. His name was Jakuta which means “One who fights with stones”, or “One who hurls stones”. In fact, when a place is struck by lightning, the priests of Sango make for the place, saying that they are going to find the lightning stone. In addition, the double ax, the distinctive weapon of Sango is identified with the thunderbolt.

The female counterpart of “The Wrath” is the goddess Oya, wife of Sango. She is described as a very strong, fierce Amazon, who is indispensable to her husband in any way. She is the goddess of the wind and storms. She is “The rushing wind that tears down trees from the top”, “One who causes heavy, dark cloud, but brings no rain”. Her face is so terrible that none dare behold it, her wrath so devastating that it must be absolutely avoided. Nevertheless, she is tall, comely, and can be graceful. In fact, *“there were sixteen rival goddess who were competing to have Sango for a husband; Oya won the husband from them all through her charm of personality, her grace and elegance of movement”*⁷.

4. THE MYTHIC TIME

The title of Olojo Oni, the “Owner of this Day” given to the supreme deity, Olodumare (or to some of his ministers) indicates that the quotidian owes its being to another sphere, which are those of the inaugural mythic events. The myth teaches the primordial histories which have occurred in the mythical times. Such happenings constituted the sacred history, because the actors are the supernatural beings. The man of archaic societies reminisces the mythic history of his group and re-enacts it mostly through the rites: knowing the origin of an object, animal or plant, and repeating the creative act of the supernatural beings, the man acquires a magic power over the world, because he produces a return to the origin and, in this way, reiterates the exemplar creation.

As man experiences the myth through the rites, he moves past the chronological, profane time and penetrates in the sacred time, that is simultaneously primordial and recoverable at any moment and forever. The re-enactment of the myths through the rites allows that the individual time be joined to the cosmic time. When the man invokes the presence of the characters of the myth to his conviviality and becomes contemporary to them, he leaves the domain of the individual, chronological time. From there on, he shares with them the Primordial Time, which is the

(7) SALAMI, S. *A Mitologia dos Orixás Africanos*. Vol.I. São Paulo, Ed. Oduduwa, 1990, p. 49.

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strong, prodigious, and sacred time, in which a new, meagful and strong event happened for the first time. In this connection, the knowledge of the proper way of performing evocations acquires an utmost importance. The correctness of the ritual and the use of the righ word constitute basic requirements for the passage from the quotidian to the Origin, from the individual to the cosmic time. In an Iba Sango (Salutation to Sango), collected by Salami⁸ we find:

*Mo juba akoda.
Mo juba aseda.
Atiyo ojo.
Atiwo oorun.
Okanlerugba irunmole.
Ikorita meta awon aye iba.
B'ekekolo ba juba ile,
Ile a lanu fun.
Olojo oni,
Iba re o.
Won b'omode ba juba agba.
A je aye pe,
Sango je njaye yi pee pee o.
Oba to to, kabiyesi o!
Sango oba.
Je ki obogbo ojo aye mi o yemi o.
Imale obogbo, iba vin o.*

*I salute The Beginning of Existence.
I salute the Creator,
The Rising Sun,
The Setting Sun,
The two hundred and one divinities.
The three crossroads, where the aye stay.
When the worm salutes the earth.
the earth opens itself in order that it enters.
O Owner of this day,*

(8) SALAMI, S. *A Mitologia dos Orixás Africanos*. Vol.I. São Paulo, Ed. Oduduwa, 1990, p.81.

I salute Thee!
It is said that when the child salutes the elders,
it will have a long life.
Sango, that I may live for a long, long time.
The Great King, Your Majesty!
Sango, the King,
that every day of my life may be happy.
All divinites, I salute you!

The first salutation is addressed to the Beginning of Existence – the Primordial Time. It is followed by the salutation to the Supreme Deity, to the King-Star, to the two hundred and one divinities (the number 201, among the Yoruba, represents the cosmic totality). The next salutation is addressed to the three crossroads, where the aye stay. Whereas the precedings salutations were made to sacred beings, this one is addressed to a portion of space, which is made sacred by the gathering of spiritual forces in it. The salutations also have power to generate favorable conditions – “When the worm salutes the earth, the earth opens itself in order that the worm enters” – It is said that when a child salutes the elders, it will have a long life. Only after the salutations, it is proper to ask for happiness. Among the Yoruba, ingratitude is a grievous sin, since they by nature are open-handed.

Among the Yoruba, shrines and temples abound all over the land. They mark out certain places traditionally connected with the presence of divinities. However, man must worship anywhere and everywhere as the “unbidden impulse” seizes him into a world which is charged with the all-pervading immanence of the supernatural. The worship must occur when the “numinous” manifestes itself, on the spot of its revelation – the bedroom, the kitchen, the yard. Generally speaking, there is no profane space among the Yoruba, hardly any place being unfitted for worship. The worship is rather determined by an alteration of the quality of time, which opens the consciousness to the other world. However, the worshipper remain aware of the physical presence of the objects surrounding him, what does not preclude the perception of the divinities and of the ancestors. An exception to this would be the trance during the possession by a supernatural being, where a complete *raptus* occurs and the consciousness of the so-called medium dives interely in the sphere of the Sacred. The seizure of the man by the Supernatural is expressed by the following Yoruba saying – “*Wherever the cobra lies in wait, there its pray will reach it*”. Like a pray moves toward a cobra as of tied to the end of a string by means of which it is draw slowly but surely and inexorably, so the man, although he may be scared by the *sacrum*, is inexorably drawn toward it.

5. SOCIAL TIME. RECKONING AND DIVISION OF TIME

Among the africans the rhythm of the works and of the days is sufficient to determine the division of time. The calendars are not abstract but based on natural phenomena (lunations, dry and rainy seasons), activities of the animals and of people. The night is separated from the day. The day is divided in parts according to the height of the sun. Each hour is marked out by concrete acts. The compliments, at several moments of the day, are based on the luminosity and the position of the shadows. These features are relatively stable, since there are no great variations throughout the year⁹

It is said of the man that go to the bed early: *A bi adie wo* – he sleeps with the hens. Appointments early in the following morning: *Bi akuko ba ko* – when the cock sings. The division marks of the night are chiefly the voices of certain animals. The work is a mixture of activities, songs and talks, constituting sometimes a religious act. It is defined by some tasks to be accomplished and not by an amount of units of time. The clock, when it appears, is used as an ornament.

The month is defined by the phases of the moon, the year by the alternance of dry and rainy seasons. The days were grouped originally in weeks of five days. Later the week of seven days was adopted, probably under the influence of Christianity and Islam. The week of five days is also found among the Bantu, and its antiquity is pointed out by the account of the creation of the earth by *Orisa-nla* in four days, with the fifth day being set apart for rest. The sacred day of the main divinities, like *Orisa-nla* and *Orumila*, still come round every fifth day. Most of the *orisa*, however, due to their prodigious number, have their sacred days on each seventh or ninth day, or even every seventeenth day. The determination of the seasons is sometimes based on astronomical observations, where certain constellations define the beginning of the seasons and the religious annual festivals. It is usual the reckoning of the years by the number off rainy seasons: to point out that a man is old, it is said he lived a large number off rainy seasons, or, through a vivid image, that he has dr drunk much water.

In the gerontocratic african societies, the notion of temporal anteriority is more charged with meaning than in other places, because it is the basis of the social rights (the use of the word in public, the consume of certain delicacies, rights in royal succussion, etc). The essencial, however, is not the precise determination of the birthdates of the people, but the order of their births. Finally, it should be noted that time, in african societies, is not measured globally, but is rather differentiated

(9) KI-ZERBO, J. *História Geral da África*. “Introdução Geral”. São Paulo, Ática/Paris, UNESCO, 1982.

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according to the age group, the status in the community, the division of work, the sex and the kinship relations.

6. THE AFRICAN CONCEPTION OF TIME – CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE TEMPORAL HORIZONS AMONG THE AFRICANS: GENERATIONS CHAIN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PAST

By temporal horizon, one should understand a temporal scale and, simultaneously, an orientation of temporal experience of an individual or a group. The temporal horizon is constituted by an ensemble of tensions and adaptations relative to the past and to the future¹⁰.

Modern societies are orientated toward the future, which is taken as a model for the present, and do not admit a cyclic representation of the time but rather presuppose possibilities of control of time. Depending on the variable “social class”, it predominates an attitude of preservation or conquest. In traditional societies, by contrast, the orientation is toward the past. The central hypothesis of Luhman (quoted by Provonost) is that differentiation between system and environment produces temporality and that the complex societies build more abstract and differentiated horizons than the simpler ones.

“The traditional african time encompasses and integrates the eternity in every aspect. The past generations are not lost from the present, but remain contemporary and often more influential than in the epoch when they live. The blood of the present day sacrifices refreshes the ancestors. Everything is omnipresent in this intemporal time of the animistic thought, where the part represents and may signify the whole; like the hair, nails which are impeded of falling from the hands of the enemies by fear might have power over the person”¹¹.

According to these authors, the social time, the history expressed by the group, accumulates a power which is symbolized by an object handed on by the patriarch, the chief of the clan, or the king, to his successor. A very interesting example is furnished by the Sonianke, descendants of Sonni Ali, who own chains of

(10) PRONOVOST, G. “The Sociology of Time”. *Current Sociology/La Sociologie Contemporaine. The Journal of the International Sociological Association/ Association Internationale de Sociologie*. Vol. 37, Number 3. Winter 1989. Sage Publications, p. 33.

(11) HAMA, B. & KI-ZERBO, J. “Lugar da História na Sociedade Africana”. São Paulo. Ática/Paris, UNESCO, 1982.

gold, silver, or copper, each link of which represents an ancestor, the ensemble symbolizing the whole dynastic descendance since Sonni the Great. During the ceremonies, these magnificent chains are regurgitated in public. At the moment of the death, the sonianke patriarch regurgitates the chain for the last time, and then the appointed successor must swallow it, beginning by the other end. The patriarch dies soon after he has handed on the chain to his successor. This alive testament vividly illustrates the strength of the african social time. One would be lead to think that such vision of hystorical process would be static and sterile, since, as the perfection of the archetype of the past is stressed, it seems to elect as an ideal for the ensemble of the generations the stereotyped repetition of the ancestor's gestures. Nevertheless, for the african the time is dynamic, the man not being imprisoned in a static process or a cyclic return. The time is a social and cosmic milieu, where the man can struggle for the development of his vital energy. The time is the closed field or the market where arrangements or negations are made with the forces which inhabit the world. To defend himself against the diminution of his being, to develop they health, the physycal fitness, the extension of his fields, the size of his herds, the number of children, of women, of villages, this is the ideal of individuals and collectivities. There is, among the Songhai, a significant strophe:

*It is not from my mouth.
It is not from mouth of A,
who gave it to B,
who gave it to C,
who gave it to D,
who gave it to E,
who gave it to F;
who gave it to me.
That the mine may be better in my mouth
than in the mouth of my ancestors¹².*

Therefore, it is true that there exists in the african a permanent urge to invoke the past. This invocation, however, does not mean opposition to change and do not contradict the accumulation of resources and improvement. "*That the mine may be better in my mouth than in the mouth of my ancestors*".

(12) HAMA, B. & KI-ZERBO, J. "Lugar da História na Sociedade Africana". São Paulo, Ática/Paris, UNESCO, 1982, p. 68.