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(by Wole Soyinka)

Chapter in the
following book ⇒

Òrìṣà Devotion as
World Religion
*The Globalization of
Yorùbá Religious Culture*

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The Tolerant Gods

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I shall begin by commenting that this gathering of minds on the eve of the millennium [Conference on the Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture, held in December 1999], to explore the Yorùbá world, one that I hope proves to be a quest beyond a mere academic exercise, was extremely timely. By that comment, I do not wish to contribute to the triumphalist hijacking of Time by one specific religion—the judeo-christian. Fortunately for my cultural peace of mind, however, I believe that any recognizable watershed of human history, and even a mere calendar notation, deserves to be seized upon and made to serve even those whose mores and cultures maintain their suspicious distance from the genesis and cultural implications of such an epoch—if only as a motivation for their own internal stock-taking, and the relationship of their history to the other world in celebration. You will find, for instance, that many christians today follow, if only partially, the annual moslem discipline of fasting; they see in it an opportunity to embark on an internal spiritual dialogue, or reflection, through a mortification of the flesh, an exercise that is made easier when it takes place within the supportive context of the extended family of faiths. Mind you, it must be conceded

that, for some, it is the ritual breaking of the fast at dusk with its sybaritic dimensions that offers the greatest attraction and fills their hours of self-privation with the anticipation of compensatory excess—don't take my word for it, just ask some of my christian acquaintances why they put on so much weight during the moslem season of Ramadan!

Still, the lesson holds. The millennium is, for the majority, an occasion for the Great Global Party; nonetheless, it cannot fail to trigger, for some of us, a reassessment of some of the great ideas that have dominated the world till now and, in the process, compel us to revisit those that, comparatively speaking, have either fallen or been pushed to the wayside, as if they have been nothing more than fleeting aberrations in the course of human development. Even if such ideas or systems of beliefs have totally vanished, the sense of the "passing of an era" and the threshold of a new one compel us to reconsider whether or not, in a moment of carelessness or globalization intoxication, some grains that once constituted the basis of our nourishment have not indeed been permitted to fly off with the chaff.

Those of us who insist on a belief in the unity, indeed, the indivisibility of the human community, no matter how buffeted such a concept has been within this century, especially by the anti-human excesses of ideology, religion, and doctrines of separatism such as racism, social darwinism, or apartheid, must consider ourselves fortunate if we happen to be heirs to certain systems of beliefs that have survived those overweening themes that appear to have successfully divided up or still contest the world among themselves. Let us name some of these: communism and capitalism, christianity and islam—plus their expansionist organs old and new in the struggle for a shifting world order—the Crusade and the Jihad, fascism and democracy, the judeo-christian Euro-American world and Arabo-Islamic consortiums, etc., plus all their extended families, aggressive offshoots, and client relations—and which, despite demonstrable and glaring errors that prove so costly to humanity itself and constantly disorganize communities, continue to arrogate to themselves the monopoly of Truth and Perfection. This mentality of binary conceptualization of a world order much, much older than many people bother to recollect makes it easy, on the one hand, to simplify "the Other," to belittle or vaporize it. On the other hand, it actually serves an ironic and contrary purpose. Even while remaining an instrument of the original hegemonic project, it eliminates, through a mere wave of the hand or aver-

sion of the eyes, the existence of pluralistic actualities both in ideas and in human organizations, and thus saves up energy for the final onslaught between only two monoliths. To make this concrete: in the struggle between the (communist) East and (capitalist) West, was there ever much of a "worthy opponent" status accorded to any other ideological alternatives? No! Every concept of human organization outside these two was something primitive, inchoate, an aberration, a rudimentary form of one or the other, or a needless distraction.

Exceptions are few and far between. Traverse human history at any moment from antiquity to the present, and you will encounter this pattern of collaboration between the most powerful contending systems: let us join hands to take care of these minnows so we can then roam the ocean at will, devoid of minor irritants—you take the West side of the longitude and we take the East. This has been the pragmatic motivation of numerous historic pacts and treaties in both major and minor keys, from the European wars of possession of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the opening up of the New World to the life-and-death struggle of capitalism and communism that has ended in a pyrrhic victory for one. In the process, alternative models and options in the creation of a just community of man are ridiculed, vilified, crushed, or simply rendered unworkable. Let us, in this connection, always call to mind the lessons of the Hitler-Stalin pact, which remains the most notorious and most chastening political symbol of the collaborationist nature of seemingly incompatible mega-themes within this century.

In the religious sector, the exemplar for this is no less uncompromising. Respect between two "world religions" but contempt or invisibility for all others. One example: the religion of islam accepts one other, judaism (and its gigantesque offspring, christianity) as a partner-rival—the absolute limits of its tolerance—since all others are regarded as offences against the Supreme Deity. Proselytization by its arch-rival is, however, rigidly forbidden, punishable by death in some nations. And conversion is equally fatal, being regarded as the capital crime of apostasy. As for the followers of all other faiths, they are obliged to convert or face permanent social exclusion, harassment, and even, in the case of members of the baha'i faith—death. The christians—roman catholics or protestant—for their part routinely relegate hinduism, buddhism, etc., to a framework of oriental quaintness, certainly not to be considered as belonging to the family of faiths with an equal status. Let us constantly

recall that it is within this hegemonic context, the union, not really of opposites but of *opposants* for the destruction of minor contenders, that our exploration of the Yorùbá world is taking place.

That world—let us begin where it all begins, within human consciousness—that world repudiates the exclusivist tendency, as is demonstrable in its most fundamental aspect—the induction of a new living entity into the world and its dedication to the spiritual custody of unseen forces. A child is born. Quite early in its life, as early as the parents discern in this new organism traces of personality, those rudimentary characteristics that will some day coalesce into what will become known as character—*iwà*—this newcomer is taken to the *babaláwo*—the priest of divination—who adds his tutored observations to the signs that have already been remarked by parents and relations. Sometimes, the *babaláwo* will take the child through the actual divination process. Mostly, however, it is his shrewd eyes, extensive experience, and honed intuition that decide for him—this, he observes, is a child of Ọṣun, or this is a child of Ẓàngó, or Ọbàtálá. It does not matter that neither parent is a follower of any such deity, or that no one in the entire household or in the history of the family has ever been an initiate of the god—the child, it is accepted, brings his or her own *orí* into the world. It is futile to attempt to change it or to impose one on him or her.

Yet even this allotment of the child's spiritual aura is not definitive, nor is it exclusive. Some other life passage—a series of setbacks, a display of talent, creative or leadership precocity, or indeed some further revelation of earlier hidden traits such as a tendency toward clairvoyance, or simply the child's habit of enigmatic utterances—may lead the *babaláwo* to conclude that a different guardian deity is indicated for the child, or an additional one. And thus, a new deity is admitted into the household. There is no friction, no hostility. All gods, the Yorùbá understand, are manifestations of universal phenomena of which humanity is also a part. Ifá is replete with *odù*—those verses that are at once morality tales, historic vignettes as they are filled with curative prescriptions, verses that narrate at the same time the experiences of both mortals and immortals for whom Ifá divined, advised, and who either chose to obey or ignore Ifá. The skeptics are neither penalized nor hounded by any supernatural forces. The narratives indicate that they simply go their way.

Of course, Ifá is not without its own tendency toward a little self-promotion, and so we find that Ifá is also filled with verses that speak of the headstrong and cynics who merely fall deeper and deeper into

misfortunes, until they return to the original path already mapped out by Ọrúnmilà. There is a crucial difference, however. It is never Ọrúnmilà, the divination god of Ifá, or any agent of his who is responsible for their misfortunes—no, it is their *orí*, destiny, the portion that they brought with them into the world, that very definition of their being that Ifá merely diagnosed before leaving them to their own devices, to their own choices. Nor is it, for instance, the resentment or vengeance of one rejected deity that proceeds to take up his or her own cause by assailing the luckless head of the unwilling acolyte—the gods remain totally indifferent toward whoever does or does not follow them or acknowledge their place in mortal decisions. The priest of Ifá never presumes to take up cudgels on behalf of the slighted deity. No excommunication is pronounced; a *fatwa* is unheard of.

The gods are paradigms of existence. Monotheism is thus only an attempted summation of such paradigms. Within it, all the inevitable variety and contradictions of human thought and physical phenomena, concepts of which are personified by the multiple deities, aspire to harmonization, representing the ideal to which humanity itself, as a unity, can hope to aspire. We find, therefore, that Revelation as Infallibility is a repugnant concept in Yorùbá religion—how can you reveal as infallible the aspects of what are in themselves only the projected ideal of human striving! If the source of such striving—the mortal vessel—is fallible, then its vision, its revelation of ultimate possibilities, must be constantly open to question, to testing, by the elected human receptacle and other human vessels to which such revelations are transmitted. By the same proceeding, the notion of “apostasy” is inconceivable in Yorùbá religion, that alleged crime of mortal damnation—in the eye of some acclaimed world religions—where the only guaranteed cure is execution, preferably by the supposedly salvationist means of stoning to death.

It was an unfortunate accident that Religion and Theology were ever linked with philosophy, a paradoxical coupling, since philosophy means a love of—and, consequently, a search for, indeed a passion for—truth. I say paradoxical because the experience of our world has been the very opposite. The dominant religions of the world and their theologies as received in present day have meant, not the search for or the love of, but the sanctification and consolidation—at whatever cost, including massacres and mayhem—of mere propositions of Truth, declared Imutable Revelation. It has meant the manipulation of Truth, the elevation of mere Texts to Dogma and Absolutes, be those Texts named Scriptures

* or Catechisms. This failure to see transmitted Texts, with all their all-too-human adumbrations, as no more than signposts, as parables that may lead the mind toward deeper quarrying into the human condition, its contradictions and bouts of illumination, a reexamination of the phenomena of Nature, of human history and human strivings, of the building of Community—it is this failure that has led to the substitution of dogma for a living, dynamic spirituality. And this is where the Yorùbá deities have an important message to transmit to the world.

There is an urgency about this, as the world is increasingly taken over by the most virulent manifestations of dogmatic adhesion, the nurturing terrain of which even tends to undermine my earlier attribution of such eruptions to Textual or Scriptural authority. In many of these instances, the defenders of the Text have never even seen the Text or are incapable of reading them, yet they swear by them and indeed presume to act on them. The explanation for this, of course, is the power of orality. The interpreters of text—even when read upside down—establish a hypnotic hold on the innate spiritual yearnings of their captive, often illiterate community. Their word is law, and where they claim to interpret the Word, their renditions of liturgy and catechisms take on an extra dimension of divinational authority over their adherents. Yorùbá “scriptural” renditions reduce this danger of subservience by making the people of Ifá key participants in the processes of divination, taking them through a route where the prognostic verses are selected in succession, intoned, and come to rest only when the suppliant recognizes a parallel of his or her predicament in the invocations of the priest. As for the actual worship of the òrìṣà, their liturgy does not pursue the path of separation between priest and laity, but the very effacement of distances, a communal celebration of the collective, direct intimacy between the gods and their followers.

If the sole achievement of our voyage into the world of the òrìṣà is to open a few eyes and ears to the subtle habit of denigration of African spirituality through the habit of elision, we would have contributed significantly to the ability of the world of knowledge to commence a serious critique of itself. I began by commenting that this voyage is timely, and, of course, that reference was addressed to a global context, the calendar notation that happens to have been universally adopted but remains a religious milestone on a road that is anything but universal. There is, however, a far more specific timing on my mind, one that relates to a hundred million people and is filled with retrogressive portents

not only for the nation immediately under reference, Nigeria, which happens to be home to the largest Yorùbá population in the world. This timing serves urgent notice on all other African nations. For recently, in the northern, largely islamic part of Nigeria, a state called Zamfara took the unprecedented step of declaring itself a moslem state within the acknowledged pluralistic faiths of the peoples of that nation.

So far, so troubling. At the same time, however, a two-part series by an academic from Africa, exiled for many years in these parts, was published at this very sensitive moment in the media of that troubled nation, extolling the virtues of this particular religion, islam, especially in the areas of secularist practice and tolerance. This article, exhumed from a different context where it had appeared some time before, offered a comparative account of the West's, and christianity's, claims to such virtues. I offer it here a useful instance of that intellectual binary con-trick that I referred to earlier, one that forecloses—by deliberate omission—any parameters that can be evoked from other spiritual world-views, especially those of the autochthonous religions over which the two foreign contenders have spread their empires. Now, let me make it quite clear—I need to, since this is an academic who is notorious for playing fast and loose with facts—so, for all it is worth, let me state very clearly that I am not about to take issue with his claims; no, not in this essay. True or false, it is of no interest whatever to me. Indeed, in the interest of the avoidance of all distraction, I wish to agree with him, just for the sake of argument, that islam is indeed in every way superior to all religions that the world has ever known, that it is the most tolerant and is imbued with a secularist understanding that puts all other religions to shame. That leaves me free, I hope, to narrow down the cause of my umbrage simply to—its timing.

Now, of course, the comparative histories, sociologies, and moral attributes—including the abyss between precept and practice—of any religion are always legitimate areas of sociocultural discourse, a permanent terrain of exploration for journals of ideas. And so, of course, by all means, let us, again and again, take a terse, rigorous look at the claims of those religious ideas that have stamped their character on world civilization, the Western nations especially and their secular impositions. It is a long way from the United States of America to Nigeria, however, and I find myself puzzled by the timing of such an exercise at the very moment when that nation is threatened with disintegration on account of the action of one state that has taken the unilateral step of declaring

itself a theocracy within a secular totality. Let me advance my contention by quoting a portion of a lecture that I delivered in Nigeria on this very theme, in response to what multitudes of Nigerians—christians, moslems, and traditional worshippers alike—regard as an assault on the cohesion of the Nigerian nation entity. I introduced my listeners to the existence of religious plurality in the United States, of which many of them remain unaware.

The religion of islam, especially, has proved the salvation of an ever-increasing number of African Americans, to the extent that many in that country even tend these days to identify islam as yet another spiritual value that especially defines the identity of the African American. No one can deny islam's claim to the second largest number of adherents among the religions practiced today in the United States. Islamic communities have sprung up all over that largely christian society. They run their own newspapers, schools, clinics, crèches, operate large, successful businesses, and are guided by the principles of *sharia*—from dress codes to marital conduct, and processes of arbitration in the community enclaves of which the mosque is the center. It is not unimaginable, therefore, that a governor may be elected in a largely black community who is a member of what is known as the Nation of Islam—so let us imagine that such an event takes place in the state of Illinois sometime within the next decade. I ask all men and women of reason—is it right, is it just or acceptable, that such a governor proceed to declare that the entire state of Illinois would henceforth be administered by the laws of the *sharia*?

It would not matter if the form of *sharia* being proposed within that renegade state were the most benevolent of its kind within the multiple versions of islam that are practiced over the world. It is only of interest for us to note that the governor of Zamfara state, northern Nigeria, has declared his intent to segregate schools, offices, and all public institutions by sex, to demarcate public transport and other utilities into rigid sectors by sex, that he has already decreed what forms of dress would be permitted for women in public places, plus a number of other measures that are anathema to other religions within the borders of the nation to which Zamfara belongs, a nation that has never been, and whose constitution does not permit the establishment of, a theocratic state. Is it only of incidental interest that the chairman of one of the local governments of that state, taking the official establishment of theocracy as his cue, has given an ultimatum to all female public employees within his local government to get married within three months—be they spinsters,

widows, or merely celibate by choice—or else! Frankly I do not think that the average Nigerian gives a hoot for the historic fact that (and here I quote from that essay of supposed illumination) “Jewish scholars rose to high positions in Muslim Spain,” or that “during the Ottoman empire, Christians sometimes attained high political office,” as witness the reign of Sulaiman (1520–1566) or Selim III (1789–1807); whereas, by contrast, “Can we imagine an American presidential candidate confessing on *Larry King Live*, ‘Incidentally, my wife is a Shiite Muslim’?”

An immensely impressive sequence of open-minded exemplars! What the average Nigerian would be interested to learn from this historian is how African traditional religions, from their own authoritative worldview, respond to the order given by a local government chieftain—in 1999—that all spinsters must marry within three months or face the wrath of the *sharia*! That women who have known virtual equality with men must now be relegated to a second-class citizen status. Or that felons would be dehumanized by public flogging or amputation of limbs.

Ralph Ellison captured the predicament of the black man in the United States in his acclaimed classic *The Invisible Man*, providing the world a bitter portrayal of the plight of millions of humanity who were rendered invisible by the arrogance of race within their own nation. I believe that it is time to speak of the Invisible Faiths and to highlight the many subtle tactics that are utilized to render them invisible. Whatever was the immediate purpose of those series, devoted at such a time to the comparative virtues of two alien religions, one immediate effect is to relegate to non-existence the anterior religions of that contested terrain. It leads the unwary reader to a perception—buttressed by centuries of indoctrination by the dichotomizing agents of the hegemonic project—of religious choices on our own soil being restricted to the demarcated territories of islam and christianity. But Zamfara, like many other parts of the so-called moslem or christian parts of Nigeria, also consists of other religious faiths, those pre-christian and pre-islamic faiths that are so wishfully dismissed as mere vestigial and inconsequential paganism. The Jukums, the Tivs, the Biroms of Northern Nigeria continue to follow (sometimes side by side with islam or christianity) the religions of their ancestors. At the moment, therefore, that a state opts to become a theocracy, it is only just that we are also permitted to consider what are the pronouncements of existing traditional religions on the establishment of a theocratic state on such a terrain. To such a question, the answer is clear: Abomination!

I limit myself for now, with merely reiterating that before Islam or Christianity invaded and subverted our worldviews, before the experience of enslavement at the hands of both Arabs and Europeans, the African world did evolve its own spiritual accommodation with the unknown, did evolve its own socioeconomic systems, its cohering systems of social relationships, and reproduced its own material existence within an integrated worldview, that those systems are still very much with us and have indeed affected both liturgy and practice of alien religions even to the extent of rendering them docile and domesticated. Thus, whenever, in contemporary times, the aggressive face of one or the other of these world religions is manifested, our recourse is primarily to the strengths of those unextinguished virtues of our antecedent faiths, the loftiest of which will be found to be expressed in such attitudes as tolerance—the genuine, not the nominal, rhetorical, or selective kind, not tolerance as an academic exercise of exterior comparisons, but one that is demonstrable by the very histories of our deities, their travails, errors, and acts of reparation, as recorded in their mythologies, and their adaptability to the dynamic changes of the world.

A periodic visitation to the world of the Yorùbá—or indeed to any of the “invisible” worldviews—must be deemed a contemporary necessity for millions of Africans, including the non-Yorùbá, the non-Christian, non-moslem, as well as Christians and Moslems, for whom this will surely serve as a catalyst for a systematic assessment of their own cultures and values. Now, of course, I remain unaware if Ifá was consulted at any time since this conference was conceived of years ago, and even if it was, I am unaware that Òrúnmilá was requested to cast for an appropriate date for it. Ifá does move in mysterious ways, however, his wonders to perform. One of the main organizers of the conference happens to be a Yorùbá, and one thoroughly versed in the mysteries of the Yorùbá world, so we do not really know how the spirit did move him. Thanks to our ancestral guardian spirits, we are enabled to remind ourselves and the world that it is not necessarily the self-promoting theologies that hold the monopoly of Truth, Justice, or Tolerance. I reiterate, and dare contradiction from any spiritual contender: Òrìṣà is the voice, the very embodiment of Tolerance. Not for one moment, of course, do I suggest that the faith that is òrìṣà claims monopoly on the virtues of tolerance—on the contrary. We simply urge those who attempt to promote the intolerance of one religion on African soil, in a modern African nation, through the route of proclaiming its comparative tolerance—real or imagined, prov-

able or merely speculative—in relation to another alien faith, to be far less zealous in such a gratuitous exercise and to recognize, to begin with, the demonstrable tolerance, both in act and in precepts, of the anterior world of any people. The Yorùbá understanding of the nature of Truth is indeed echoed by the Vedic texts from yet another ancient world, the Indian, which declares: “Wise is the one who recognizes that Truth is One and one only, but wiser still the one who accepts that Truth is called by many names, and approached from myriad routes.” *

The accommodative spirit of the Yorùbá gods remains the eternal bequest to a world that is riven by the spirit of intolerance, of xenophobia and suspicion. This tolerance—if we may spend a little time on the nature of the gods themselves—this tolerance is not limited to the domestic front or to internal regulations only. The Foreign Affairs department—and that is not so whimsical a designation in a career that has entailed, in such poignant and universal dimensions, strategies for relating to external spiritual zones and evolving strategies of accommodation and survival—the Foreign Affairs department has shown itself equally adaptable to the incursion of foreign experiences. To understand the instructional value of this in relation to other religions, one has only to recollect that, for some religions, even today, the interpretation of their scriptures in relation to human inventiveness is toward foreclosure, so that modern innovations in the technological and cultural fields are simply never permitted. We may choose to call these fundamentalist sects, but authority for the exclusionist approach to new phenomena is always extracted from their Scriptures—the Bible, the Koran, or the Torah. By contrast, the corpus of Ifá, which we may consider the closest to any aggregation of spiritual findings of the Yorùbá that are usually termed scriptures or catechism—Ifá emphasizes for us the perpetual elasticity of knowledge. Ifá’s tenets are governed by a frank acknowledgement of the fact that the definition of Truth is a goal that is constantly being sought by humanity, that existence itself is a passage to Ultimate Truth, and that claimants to possession of the definitiveness of knowledge are, in fact, the greatest obstacles to the attainment of Truth. Acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge remains Ifá’s abiding virtue, a lesson that is implanted in the Yorùbá mind by the infinitely expansible nature of the gods themselves.

Examine the attributes of Šàngó, for instance—what was this deity at the time of his adoption by Yorùbá society? The god of lightning. Following from this principle, Šàngó’s portfolio becomes extended to

include a scientific discovery and application—electricity. Michael Faraday was not born in the land of the Yorùbá, and certainly the autochthones of that land were not aware of the fact that he first succeeded in establishing the principles of electricity by harnessing lightning charges through a kite and running them down to a receptor. Nevertheless, when electricity came to Yorùbáland, it was immediately added to the portfolio of this god Šàngó. We dare not forget, by the way, that the priests of Šàngó were not above profiting from human disaster and attributing lightning strikes to the ire of the god who singled out malefactors for punishment. Nowhere in the world has the priesthood ever been devoid of opportunism, especially for economic advantage. What we wish to elicit from the relationship of the Yorùbá pantheon to both natural and human-engineered phenomena is simply the ethos of responsiveness, of a refusal to exclude experience for the sake of the pristinitism of dogma or usage. For the Yorùbá, on encountering the taming and control of electricity, there was hardly any surprise. Šàngó was merely domesticating its power for the benefit and progress of humanity.

Or take Ògún, the god of iron, an especially remarkable case that goes beyond an adjustment of portfolios to technological progress. We all know of Ògún, of course—the god of iron, protector of the forge, and embodiment of the lyric arts. The mastery of iron and the evolution of metallurgy remain one of the crucial phases of human development; hence the especial notation that is given to the Iron Age as a quantum leap in the progression of civilization. There is no question that the formal investment of Ògún in Yorùbá consciousness is coterminous with the development or encounter with the arts of metallurgy. So significant is the assessment of such a step in the technological evolution that nothing less than the cooption of the entire Yorùbá world of deities and their relationship with mortal beings would satisfy Ògún's epiphany. It was as if the Yorùbá, encountering the virtues of metallic ore, its paradoxical character of durability and malleability, its symbolism and utility as alloy, read in it the explication of the potential integration of disparate elements of all nature phenomena. The myth of Ògún goes thus:

The gods, who in any case were products of a primordial unity—as narrated in the myth of Atunda who shattered the original godhead into what we may now read as a principle of one-in-plurality and plurality-in-one—were beset by a yearning to unite with that portion of their original essence that had been flung across the primordial void, the

fragment of an original unity that became the primogenitor of mortals. Yearning for a recovery of the original unified essence, they decided to undertake the perilous journey across the void.

(In other readings, we do encounter a version in which the Supreme Deity had created the world of mortals, left them to their devices, and then one day invited his fellow deities to accompany him on a visit to see how that world was faring. My suspicion is that this is a corruption of the original myth, and that it smacks too much of the christian myth in which the Supreme Deity descends to earth in the body of his son, gets killed, and thereby atones for the sins of the world).

No matter what version we choose to adopt, however, the heart of the Ògún myth is this: when the gods began their journey for a reunion with the mortal realm, they found their progress impeded by a void that, during the aeons of time of separation, had become impenetrable. One after the other they tried to hack their way through the primordial growth, but all efforts were in vain.

It was then that Ògún rose and pledged to penetrate this chthonic outgrowth. He plunged into this seething chaos and extracted from within it the only element that would guarantee its defeat. That element was iron ore. From iron ore, Ògún forged the mystic tool and wielded it to hack a path for other gods to follow. It was this feat that earned Ògún a place as one of the seven principal deities of the Yorùbá pantheon, and one to whom belongs the pioneering urge—one of his praise-songs goes thus: *he who goes forth where other gods have turned*. On arriving in the land of the mortals, all the deities, like our well-endowed tourists, went their different ways, each one encountering a different adventure. Ògún ended up at Ire, where the people adopted him as theirs. He led them into battle, where, his sight clouded by an over-indulgence in palm wine, he mistakenly slew foe and friend alike. Even so, he was offered the crown of Ire but declined it, preferring to retreat into the hills, where he mourned his day of error, cultivating a farm patch and converting his terrible discovery to peaceful use. Do we see here why the Yorùbá would in no way be over-excited by the moral lessons of the horrors of atomic energy, followed by its peaceful conversion? Today, Ògún is guardian deity of all workers in metal—the truck driver, the engineer, the air pilot or astronaut. All human adventure is prefigured—symbolically—in the history of the Yorùbá deities. Thus, there is no surprise, no inhibition

created from scientific encounters. Some new phenomenon, friendly or hostile, is encountered, and from within the armory of Ifá and the accommodative narratives of the gods, an understanding is extracted.

We begin to understand now why it was so logical that the Yorùbá deities should have survived in the New World, across the Atlantic, while most other religions and cultures atrophied and died. Encountering the roman catholic saints in the worship of their intolerant masters, these slaves who were already steeped in the universality of phenomena saw the saints as no more than channels and symbols of the spiritual quest and repository of the glimmerings of Ultimate Truth. They were intercessors to Supreme Godhead, bridges between the living and the ancestor world. If the plantation owners were hostile to any implantation of African spirituality on the soil of the Indies and the Americas, the solution was handy—co-opt the roman catholic deities into the service of Yorùbá deities; then genuflect before them.

Very much the same strategy was adopted in the secular arena, I recall, during one of our intermittent political crises in western Nigeria, home to the Yorùbá, when a somewhat ruthless political party, enjoying the advantage of incumbency, proceeded to coerce the populace into declaring allegiance to its candidates. The symbol of that party was the Hand—an image surely prone to positive interpretations. That government, however, had reckoned without the subversive ingenuity of its opponents, which consisted of nearly the entirety of the Yorùbá region over which it ruled. Compelled to display the symbol of the hand on their hats, vests, in business offices, and even in homes as proof of their allegiance to a detested government, the electorate of the then western region of Nigeria merely added a small lyrical phrase to the traditional repertoire of greetings and song, a message that was transmitted through a particular hand gesture that everyone soon learned to read as *owó l' orí, oo r' inuu mi*. Translated, it states simply: it is only my hand that you see, but not my mind—you have no clue as to my ultimate intentions. And, of course, when election time finally came, a seemingly cowed populace handed the regime its most memorable defeat. Yes, the slaves in Brazil, Cuba, and other South American plantations did bow to alien gods, but the liturgies that they intoned were very much the liturgies of their authentic spirituality.

The process went much further; it proceeded beyond internalization of spiritual allegiance and embarked on an appropriation of the christian symbols, and this, unquestionably, was a response to the insistence

of the slave masters that their slaves display visible signs of their conversion, that they mount the iconic presence of the saints even within their paltry domestic spaces. So the slaves displayed the images of the saints but addressed them in the parallel names of their own deities—St. Lazarus/Sòpòná, St. Anthony/Ògún, Our Lady of the Candles/Òṣun, etc. And here is the point: this never constituted a spiritual dilemma, since the system of the gods has always been one of complementarity, of affinities, and of expansion—but of the non-aggressive kind. The deities could subsume themselves within these alien personages and eventually take them over. One cinematic illustration of this suggests itself—those films of alien body snatchers where the creatures from outer space insert their beings into the carapace of earthlings, eventually dominate, not only the human forms but the environment and culture, insert themselves into crevices of landscape and social actualities, and can only be flushed out with the aid of weed killers, flame throwers, gamma rays, or quicklime. The difference, of course, is that the African deities were made of sterner yet more malleable stuff—the principle of alloys. Always generous in encounters with alien “earthlings,” they accommodated, blended, and eventually triumphed.

The key word, of course, is tolerance—and this I do wish to impress on our brothers and sisters of the Diaspora. Tolerance means humility, not daring to presume that one has found the ultimate answer to Truth, or daring to claim that only through one's intuitions will be found the sole gateway to Truth. All the major religions, the so-called world religions that are built on such claims, have inflicted competitive agonies on humanity since the beginning of time. It is time that we called such religions to their own altars of repentance.

There are religions in the world that point the way to the harmonization of faiths; it is the loss of the world that many of them are little known, their unassuming, ancient wisdoms being superstructurally dwarfed by the—admittedly—often awe-inspiring monuments on the world's landscape—cathedrals, mosques, temples, and shrines, and indeed by the challenging paradoxes of their exegeses—I say “paradoxes” because they are no more than intellectual constructs on foundations of the unproven and unprovable. The disquisitions—just to take one single but mesmerizing aspect of christian theology—on Transubstantiation alone since the textualization of christianity will fill an average university library. But these all-consuming debates and formal encyclicals are constructed on what we may term a proliferating autogeny within a

hermetic realm—what is at the core of arguments need not be true; it is sufficient that the layers upon layers of dialectical constructs fit snugly on top of one another; there need not be any substance at the core. And when one examines the ancient manuscripts, the lovingly illuminated manuscripts especially of the so-called Dark and Middle Ages, when those artistic minded monks had nothing else to do during the long dark nights of winter seasons—daylight saving time not being thought of at that time—and had only the saints and angels as outlets for expressing their love for humanity, those manuscripts strike us today with awe and admiration and, of course, reinforce the beliefs of multitudes. So do the buddhist Sutras, the hindu Vedas, the prayer scrolls in buddhist temples, or the ancient texts of the Holy Koran.

Those very seductions that are the outward embellishments of these religions are also recognizable as competitive attributes of the secular world, especially those that are raised to ideological ascendancies. The monumental achievements of either fascism or communism, the splendor and pageantry that trumpeted their existence, the arts, architecture, and ideological treatises still attract or repel us. Their aesthetic virtues may not amount to much—witness the architectural horrors of the Third Reich or communist regimes!—but the sheer grandiose scale of their conception and execution continue to astound, yet neither ideology has presented the world with any lasting truths. Even thus must we view the existence of cathedrals and mosques, of temples and shrines, even as we feast our eyes on their illuminated scriptures, are enraptured by their spiritually elevating music, and imbibe the mystery of their rituals. Not one of these, or any religion known to humanity, can affirm, in any testable way, the eternal verities of whatever Truths they proclaim.

By contrast, apart from its own philosophical literature, and apart from that short-lived bemusing experimentation—arts, festivals of reason, architecture—from the French Revolution, Humanism, for its part, has no ostentatious monuments or rituals that testify to any ineradicable virtues. Its monuments exist, of course; they are visible everywhere in the advances of humanity in the arts and sciences, in the mundane handiwork of man and the constant enhancement of his productive capability and his environment, but these are never labeled as such. The great symphonies, the classic sculptures from the Yorùbá to the Arawaks, the successful orbiters and the failed Mars Lander are the monuments of humanism, though they are never mounted on a plinth labeled Humanism. But despite the absence of such nominal appropriation, we find that

Humanism does enjoy, at the very least, some element of lip service paid to its tenets by all religions. Indeed, these religions appear to fall over one another in attempting to ground their concerns in the elevation of humankind, just as the failed, contending ideologies attempted to root their principles in the primacy of humane values—egalitarianism, end of exploitation, universal brotherhood, etc. What we must pursue, therefore, is not a competitive, bruising arena for the claims of ideology or religion, but an open marketplace of both ideas and faith. Here, then, without any ambiguity is where Ifá, the divine body of precepts, proves itself one of the great humanistic tracts in the realm of religion. As quest, as the principle of spiritual enquiry, Ifá exemplifies this field of accommodation in one of its *odù*, the prognostic verses of Òrúnmìlà, the *odù* of IKADI:

B'ómòdé bá nşawo ògbójú, bí ó bá ko ògbó awo lónà, kio o gba a l'ójú.
Bí ó bá ko àgbà ìşègùn, kí ó je ẹ n'íyà lẹpẹlẹpẹ. Bí ó bá burinburin tí
ó rí àgbà àlùfa níbití ó ní orí k'alẹ, ki o d'aju ẹ dé 'be. A da a f'awon
aláigboran tii wípé: Kò sí ẹnítí o lè mú wọn. Ee ti ri? Eyin kó mò pé:
Àjẹpẹ aiyé kò sí f'ómọ tí ó na Ògbó awo. Àtẹlẹpẹ kò wà fuń awon tí
nna àgbà ìşègùn. Omọ ti nna àgbà àlùfa níbi tí ó gbé níkirun, ikú ara ẹ ló
nwá. Wàràwàrà mà ni ikú ìdin, wàràwàrà.

[The brash youth meets an ancient babaláwo and strikes him. He meets an old herbalist and humiliates him. He runs into a venerable moslem priest kneeling in prayer and knocks him to the ground. Ifá divined for such insolent ones who boasted that they were beyond correction. Is that so indeed? Don't you know that a youth who strikes a priest of Ifá will not partake of this world for long? Premature is the death of the youth who strikes the devout imam at his devotions. Speedily comes the death of maggots, speedily.]

Now bear in mind that islam invaded the black world and subverted its traditions and religions, sometimes violently and contemptuously. It rivaled the latter aggressor, christianity, in violence for violence, contempt for contempt. Both of them proven iconoclasts, yet, what wisdom does this largely superceded and humiliated religion of the òrìşà prescribe for its own adherents? Tolerance, it enjoins, tolerance! You humiliate the moslem priest, warns Ifá, and you will die the death of maggots.

The òrìşà do not proselytize. They are content to be, or to be regarded as, non-existent. We need not embrace the òrìşà, however, to profit from

the profound wisdoms that can be extracted from Ifá. Our self-vaunting repositories of exclusive spiritual truths can learn from this ancient, unassuming faith of our forebears. Ifá preaches tolerance. Ifá takes issue with any religion or faith that denies tolerance a place in its worship, and this is why, in another *odù*, you will encounter a sterner, critical face of Ifá turned against the same religion of islam. Ifá embodies the principle of the constant spiritual quest, one to which the notion of apostasy—and this we must continue to stress—the attachment of mortal sin to the act of religious conversion, is simply unthinkable. How could it be otherwise when the Source of knowledge, *Ọ̀rúnmilà*, the mouth-piece of the Supreme Deity who directs the feet of the seeker toward a spiritual mentor or guardian deity, is not granted the cloak of infallibility even within Ifá, the very source of his wisdom? The Supreme *òrìṣà*, or Ultimate Godhead—*Òrìṣà-Ílá*, who is also known as *Olódùmarè*—is nothing like the christians' "jealous god," but the *òrìṣà* are nonetheless the true embodiment of that christian dictum: Seek, and ye shall find.

It is the profound humanism of the *òrìṣà* that recommends it to a world in need of the elimination of conflict, since the main source of conflict between nations and among peoples is to be found as much in the struggle for economic resources as in the tendency toward the domination of ideas, be these secular or theological. Recalling the warning of W. E. B. Du Bois at the end of the nineteenth century, that the main issue of the twentieth century would be one of the color line, it is more than justifiable to suggest that the main issue of the twenty-first century, of the third millennium, will be one of religion; such is the all-consuming intensity with which the fanatic strain attempts to overwhelm our world. Yet the problem does not really lie with christianity, or with islam, judaism or hinduism, etc., but with the irredentist strain that appears to have afflicted these world religions, unlike the world of the *òrìṣà*. Let all these religions therefore pause and ask themselves, why is it that the worship of *òrìṣà* has never, in all these centuries, spawned an irredentist strain? The answer lies, of course, in the profound humanism of the *òrìṣà*.

Òrìṣà, being profoundly humanist, separates the regulation of community from communion with the spirit, even while maintaining a mythological structure that weaves together both the living community and the unseen world. But that world of the spirit does not assume any competitive posture whatever over the pragmatic claims of this world. *B' énià kò sí, imalẹ̀ ò lẹ̀ wà* (If humanity were not, the deities would not

be). And very much in the same frame of apportionment is the seeming paradox that although every mortal is believed to have brought his own *orí*, or portion, destiny, into the world, that same view of existence declares: *owó ara ẹni l' a fi ńtuń t' ara ẹni se* (Within one's own hands lies the potential of directing one's destiny.)

My final word comes from the already mentioned address that I delivered in Nigeria in admonition of those theocratic politicians who are resolved to set our world on fire, and it is urgently directed at those meddlesome closet clerics who provide pretentious, spuriously objectivized academic covering fire for the incursion of prejudice, creating smokescreens to divert our attention from issues of life and death, issues of human dignity, mutual tolerance, and mutual respect, blithely ignoring the relegation of one half of humanity—the female—to subservience and social degradation through the selective interpretation of some of the scriptures they champion. Our counter-propositions arise as much from the glaring failures of the worldviews they have chosen to promote as models of perfection, or as liberalized exemplars, as from our knowledge of the tolerance amplitude of religions and worldviews that existed before the advent of these newly aggressive faiths.

Between fanaticism and Community, we choose Community, and *òrìṣà* is community. Community is the basic unit, the common denominator and definition of humanity—this is the lesson of the *òrìṣà*. And in the strategies for regulating and preserving community, the *òrìṣà* have ceded the right of choice to humanity and to the deductions of its intelligence—not to intuitions and their interpretations by any self-serving priesthood. Even the collective manifestation of faith is constantly selective and exclusive, unlike the secular order that necessarily embraces all—this Ifá recognizes, and this it is that nerves us to say, go to the *òrìṣà* and be wise. Religion, or profession of faith, cannot serve as the common ground for human co-existence except, of course, by the adoption of coercion as a principle and, thus, the manifestation of its corollary, hypocrisy, an outward conformism that is dictated by fear, by a desire for preferment, or, indeed, the need for physical survival. In the end, the product is conflict and the destruction of cultures. Let this be understood by the closet champions of theocracies where religion and dictatorship meet and embrace. Let us resolve to say to them: you will not bring our world even close to the edge of combustion. The essence of *òrìṣà* is the antithesis of tyranny and dictatorship—what greater gift than this

tolerance, this accommodation, can humanity demand from the world of the spirit?

And thus, for all seekers after the peace of true community, and the space of serenity that enables the quest after Truth, we urge yet again the simple path that was traveled from the soil of the Yorùbá across the hostile oceans to the edge of the world in the Americas—Go to the òrìṣà, learn from the òrìṣà, and be wise.

2

Who Was the First to Speak?

Insights from Ifá Orature and Sculptural Repertoire

ROWLAND ABIODUN

Ta ló kọ wí?
 Èlà ló kọ wí.
 Ta ló kọ sọ?
 Èlà ló kọ sọ.
 Ta ni à òpè ní Èlà?
 Hòḍ tó rò náà
 Ni à òpè ní Èlà.

[Who was the first to speak?
 Èlà was the first to speak.
 Who was the first to communicate?
 Èlà was the first to communicate.
 Who is this Èlà?
 It is the Hòḍ, which descended,
 That we call Èlà.]

—Pa David Adeniji, personal communication, 1980

“Who was the first to speak?” And, “In whose tongue?” It was Èlà, the òrìṣà who spoke through verbal, visual, and the performing arts and illuminated the highly energy-charged, restless, and heavenly constituents of Òrò—the embodiment of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Since the Yorùbá are a traditionally nonwriting society, the arts became immediately important as efficient means of preserving culture and aesthetic values, recording history, and providing an indispensable body of information for healing physical and human problems.

Èlà is the explicatory principle within the Ifá divination system. Èlà