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

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Abstract

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

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

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

Resumo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


4 While incorporating social scientific methods, Olúpọ̀nà’s *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community* remains one of the few and most extensive phenomenological studies of Yorùbá cosmology as a socio-temporally transformative cultural tradition.
of approaches of the anthropological variety beginning in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries leads one to wonder in whose cultural image Yorùbá cosmology has been discursively molded.

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

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

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

Ilé-Ifê and Igbá Ìwà

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

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

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

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

*Àṣẹ*, the power that “makes things happen,” stems from *Olódùmarè* and sustains all life on earth (*Ayê*) (ABÍMBÒLÁ, 1997, p. 172)\(^9\). Yorùbá scholar and priest (*Babalòrisà*) Kólá Abímbólá outlines a politico-communal order of being\(^11\) as structured within the framework of Yorùbá cosmology. Abímbólá’s outline is instructive because it makes clear the source of *Àṣẹ* while also providing a sense of how *Àṣẹ* is distributed throughout creation: *Olódùmarè* is joined at the top of the politico-communal order of being by *Ọbàtálá* (*Òrìṣà-ńlá*), *Ifá* (*Òrùnmìlà*), and *Èṣù*, three deities whose roles in Yorùbá originary narratives are arguably more significant than those of other *Òrìṣà* (deities serving as sources of religious devotion and as administrative functionaries of *Olódùmarè*)\(^12\); The second level is occupied by other *Òrìṣà*, the *Ajogun* (warriors against humanity and the good forces of nature)\(^13\), and the *Ajé/Èleje/Eniyán* (bird people, owner of birds; negative people who have largely relinquished their capacity for goodness in favor of doing the destructive bidding of the *Ajogun*); Humans, plants, and animals make up the third level, while the *Egùn/Egúngün*\(^14\), or *Ará Òrun/Òkù Òrun* (ancestors/denizens of the spirit world) inhabit the

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


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

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

The Birth of Olódùmarè?

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

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Ahéré oko sísùn ní mú òpòló tó lú ní òru
A dá fun erè
Ti o ni ekún se iráhún omo
Nwón ní ki ó rúbó kí ó lè bì omo: ewùré kan, aso kíjipá ara rè, ějilógún
O gbó, ó ru
Erè sì loyalty, o si bí omo
Àwon ènià sì béréèsií wípè ‘lódù ni omo tí erè bì yi’
Nígbá tí omo náà sì dágbá, ó sì joba ní ojú iyá rè
Oun ni gbogbo ènià sì npè ní Olóðùmàrè títí di òní.

‘When we sleep in the farm hut, frogs jump on us in the night’
was the one who cast Ifá [performed divination] for Python
when she was weeping and moaning for a child.
They say she should sacrifice one she-goat, the homespun cloth she was
wearing and eleven shillings so that she might be able to have a child.
She heard and made the sacrifice,
and Python became pregnant, and she gave birth to a child.
And people began to say: ‘One who has Odù’ was this child that
Python bore.
And when the child grew up, she lived to see him become a king.
He is the one whom all people are calling “One who has Odù, child of
Python” (Olóðùmàrè) until this very day18.

Ifá didá, the systematic divinatory “process” referenced in the verse
which is said to have been bequeathed to the Yorùbá people by Ifá (the
Óriṣà of “wisdom and intellectual development”), will be addressed mo-
mentarily19. Of interest presently is the significance of this verse vis-à-vis
Olóðùmàrè and the verse’s trajectory of meaning.

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

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{22} LAWAL, Babatunde. Ójìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. \textit{African Arts}, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.


\textsuperscript{24} LAWAL, Babatunde. Ójìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture. \textit{African Arts}, v. 41, no. 1, p. 26, 2008.
material relationship between Python and Olódùmarè provides a context for Olódùmarè’s authoritative cosmic status and seminal role in the three narratives studied below. We move now to the first of these narratives.

The Creation of the “Solid Earth” and Human Beings

In the first chapter of Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief, author E. Bólájí Idòwú cites an early Yorùbá originary narrative involving Ilé-Ifẹ and the creation of the “solid earth.” In examining this narrative, readers will notice Idòwú’s problematic tendency of referencing the genderless Olódùmarè using the pronoun “He,” which is not in keeping with descriptions of the chief deity found in Yorùbá oral tradition\textsuperscript{25}. The narrative is quoted in full below:

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

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

\textsuperscript{25} Such gendered descriptions are inconsistent with portrayals of Olódùmarè found in Odù Ifá. As Abímbólá explains, “... the Ifá Literary Corpus always refers to Olódùmarè as an entity who exists in spiritual form only. Ifá does not make use of any genderised personal pronoun to refer to the High ‘Deity.’ So in reality, Olódùmarè is neither male nor female.” ABÍMBÓLÁ, Kólá. Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, p. 51.
When Olódùmarè was satisfied that the work had indeed been accomplished, he sent Òrìṣà-ńlá back to equip and embellish the earth. This time, he sent Òrùnmilà [Ifá, Orunla] to accompany him and be his counselor. To Òrìṣà-ńlá, Olódùmarè handed the primeval Igi Òpẹ (Palm Tree). This he was to plant – its juice would give drink, its seed would give oil as well as kernels for food. He gave him also three other trees which were full of sap. These were Iré (Silk Rubber Tree), Awùn (Whitewood), and Dòdo. These also were to be planted and propagated: their juices would give drink. For as yet, there was no rain upon the earth. The original hen and pigeon which had been used in spreading the loose earth should somehow increase and multiply and provide meat for the dwellers on earth.

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

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

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

A story is told of how, once, Òrìṣà-ńlá envied Olódùmarè this right to be the sole Giver of life. He therefore laid a plan to spy on Him. When he had completed his work one day, instead of locking up the completed forms and leaving the place, he locked himself in with them and hid in a corner, awaiting the arrival of Olódùmarè. Olódùmarè, however . . . knew his crafty design and forestalled him by putting him into a deep slumber from which he awoke only when all the forms in his stock had become human beings. Since then, Òrìṣà-ńlá has contented himself with his own allotted part of the work.
The office of a ‘creator’ gave Òrìṣà-ńlá the prerogative to make at will human figures perfect or defective, and of whatever colours he wants them to be. The hunchback, the cripple, or the albino, are special marks of his prerogative or, more often than not, ispleasure.

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

Mystery

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

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27 I prefer Oyèwùmí’s use of the term “world-sense” in her deconstructive analysis of European biologically based misunderstandings of knowledge production and social organization among the pre-colonial Òyó-Yorùbá. She writes, The term “worldview,” which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term “world-sense” is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups. In this study, therefore, “worldview” will only be applied to describe the Western cultural sense, and “world-sense” will be used when describing the Yorùbá or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses. OYĔWŬMĬ, Oyĕrŏnké. The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 2-3.
human intellect. This means, for instance, that the ultimate motivating factors for over three billion years of biological evolution and nearly fourteen billion years of cosmic expansion cannot be known. This also means that the primary motives underpinning the complex inner workings of the spirit world are humanly incomprehensible. Our ability as humans to gain a more complete understanding of a particular being is in large measure predicated upon the accessibility of knowledge related to that being’s patterns of intentionality. Said differently, a critical understanding of the principal logic governing the creative activity of a being is vital to the acquisition of comprehensive knowledge about that being. Given that human knowledge of Olódùmarè does not include an understanding of the principal logic undergirding Olódùmarè’s creative agenda pertaining to the solid earth or to other dimensions of existence, the deeper recesses of Olódùmarè’s being remain shrouded in mystery.

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

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30 ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 114. Abímbólá elaborates on the significance of Òrí when he writes, Since every man’s Ori is his personal god, he is more interested in the welfare of the individual than the other gods. Therefore, if an individual is in need of anything, he should first of all make his desires known to his Ori before he approaches any other god for assistance. If a man’s Ori is not in sympathy with his cause, no god will sympathize with him and consequently he will not have the things he wants. ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 142.
the individual’s largely irrevocable choice of Orí. There is no guarantee that the chosen Orí will be good in nature. This is so because Ájálá, the spiritual entity credited as the supplier of Orí, gives to each unborn human an Orí that is either good or bad. The nature of the chosen Orí cannot be known beforehand. Thus, the kind of Orí an individual selects is purely a matter of chance.

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

Bí ó bá ṣe pé gbogbo orí gbogbo ni i sun pósí, Ìrókò gbogbo ibá ti tán n’ígbo. A diá fún igha éni, Tí át’Ìkólé Ṡrùn bò wá sí t’àyé. Bí ó bá ṣe pé gbogbo orí gbogbo ni i sun pósí, Ìrókò gbogbo ibá ti tán n’ígbo. A diá fún Òwèrè, Tí át’Ìkólé Ṡrùn bò wá sí t’àyé. Òwèrè là ńjá, Gbogboo wa. Òwèrè là ńjá. Ón’ t’ó yan’rí rere kò wòpò. Òwèrè là ńjá, Gbogboo wa. Òwèrè là ńjá.

(“If all men were destined to be buried in coffins, all ìrókò trees would have been exhausted in the forest. Ifá divination was performed for two hundred men who were coming from heaven to earth. If all men were destined to be buried in coffins, all ìrókò trees would have been exhausted in the forest. Ifá divination was also performed for Struggle who was coming from heaven to earth. We are only struggling. All of us. Those who chose good destinies are not many. We are only struggling. All of us. We are only struggling”). ABÍMBÕLÁ, Wándé. Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, pp. 146-147.
Also important to mention is the belief that only Òrúnmilà/Ifá (the deity of knowledge and wisdom)\textsuperscript{32} knows the nature of each human being’s Ori as well as the nature of each Òrisà’s Ori\textsuperscript{33}. Therefore, the nature of a person’s Ori cannot be determined from physical attributes or behavioral characteristics. As one researcher puts it,

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

This understanding of Ori is consistent with a verse (ẹsẹ) from Òsá Méjì, the tenth Odù (book, chapter)\textsuperscript{35} of the Ifá oral corpus:

Orí burúkú kí i wú tuulu.
A ki i dá ẹsẹ aṣiwèrèè mò lójú-ònà.
A ki i m’ori olórì lâwùjọ.
A diá fún Móbowú
tí iṣe obinrin Ògùn.
Orí tí ó joba lólá,
Ènikàn ò mò;
Kí tọko-taya ó mó pe’raa won ní were mó.
Orí tí ó joba lólá,
Ènikàn ò mò.


\textsuperscript{33} It is believed that each of the Òrisà also has his or her own Ori, the “wishes” of which can only be determined through “consultation” with Òrúnmilà. What is more, knowledge of Òrúnmilà’s own Ori does not automatically accrue to him. Instead, like human beings and the other Òrisà, Òrúnmilà must make use of his “Ifá divination instruments in order to find out the wishes of his Ori.” ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. \textit{Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus}. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976, p. 115.


A bad head does not swell up.
Nobody knows the foot-prints of a mad man on the road.
Nobody can distinguish the head destined to wear a crown in an assembly.
Ifá divination was performed for Móbówú
who was the wife of Ògún.
The head that will reign tomorrow,
obody knows it.
Let husband and wife stop calling each other names.
The head that will reign tomorrow,
obody knows it36.

This verse further grounds the Yorùbá conception of Ori as an elusive
reality to which humans ironically have limited access. The verse also
amplifies the uncertainty involved in the selection of Ori. In order for a
person to gain knowledge of her Ori, she must actively seek the wisdom
of Òrúnmilà. However, seeking this wisdom does not eliminate the mys-
terious uncertainty accompanying all efforts to attain the destiny desired
by one’s Ori37. Yet, effort remains a crucial component of Ori.

The attainment of human destiny is possible only through protracted
struggle on the part of the individual. The necessity of this struggle is
expressed by the idea of esè (leg, legs)38. Wândé Abímóbólá (1978) explains
the relationship between esè and Ori in the following manner:

Whether or not the individual has chosen a good orí, he must still labor to realize his
potential: hence the concept of esè. Just as every individual has chosen an orí, he also
has his own esè with which he will have to struggle in life to aid his orí in the
realization of his destiny. Esè represents the principle of activity and struggle without
which even the best orí cannot unfold its good potentialities. As for those who have
chosen bad orí, they have to work harder and struggle more with their esè before they
can achieve success in life39.

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36 ABÎMBÔLÁ, Wândé. Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus. Ibadan: Oxford University
37 ABÎMBÔLÁ, Wândé. Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus. Ibadan: Oxford University
38 ABÎMBÔLÁ, Kólá. Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Aca-
Yusuf and MARCULESCU, Ileana, eds. Contemplation and Action in World Religions: Selected
Papers from the Rothko Chapel Colloquium “Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action.”
39 ABÎMBÔLÁ, Wándé. Yorùbá Traditional Religion. In: IBISH, Yusuf and MARCULESCU,
Ileana, eds. Contemplation and Action in World Religions: Selected Papers from the Rothko
Chapel Colloquium “Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action.” Seattle, WA: University
An important insight we can glean from Abimbọ́lá’s explanation is that while ongoing struggle makes the realization of one’s destiny more likely, such struggle does not guarantee the realization of one’s destiny. This insight – along with a consideration of the opacity of ultimate purpose as regards the provision of Ori by Àjàlá and a recognition of human beings’ limited access to information about the true nature of any given Ori – makes visible the presence of mystery in the Yorùbá conception of destiny. The intended meaning of the term “opacity of ultimate purpose” in reference to Ori is simply this: In a final analysis, it is unclear why the kind of Ori chosen by an unborn person is a matter left to chance. Moreover, it is also unclear why knowledge of the true nature of a person’s Ori is not more readily available. These points together represent an element of mystery endemic to Yorùbá cosmology. One must recognize, then, that this mysterious element tempers a Yorùbá epistemology of human existence, thereby keeping alive an experience among the Yorùbá of the human being as a source of the unknown.

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

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

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

Ôrìṣà-ńlá’s Scheme

In the narrative, Ôrìṣà-ńlá grows desirous of the knowledge necessary to animate the human forms he creates. This knowledge, however, is the exclusive domain of Olódùmarè. Undaunted, Ôrìṣà-ńlá devises a scheme; he hides among the inanimate human forms awaiting “breath” (èmí) from Olódùmarè41 in order to surreptitiously observe the divine bestowal of life and thereby acquire knowledge he otherwise would not possess. However, Olódùmarè foils Ôrìṣà-ńlá’s plan by causing him to sleep through the moment during which his “sculpted” human forms are infused with èmí. The thwarting of this ill-advised scheme is important for our understanding of Yorùbá epistemology, for it heuristically represents the bounded nature of knowledge. Interestingly, though, Ôrìṣà-ńlá’s scheme and Olódùmarè’s response are significant also because they point toward that for which knowledge ultimately strives: an exhaustive understanding of the unknown.

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

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

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

**Materially-Based Relationality**

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

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

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

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

Unpredictability

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

The unpredictable dimension of matter as reflected in Òrìṣà-ńlá’s somewhat whimsical role as sculptor divinity evokes the functions of mystery and materially-based relationality as orienting concepts in Yorùbá epistemology; the concept of materially-based relationality grounds human knowledge in the dynamic entanglement with matter ensuing from existence in the physical world, while the concept of mystery radically delimits the scope of human knowledge. As mentioned earlier, the concept of unpredictability adds to our understanding of material entanglement the element of dangerous uncertainty. This leads to an important point worth accenting: In conjunction with mystery, unpredictability destabilizes the
authoritative status of human knowledge. This is not to suggest that the accumulation of human knowledge carries no authority whatsoever with respect to cognitive orientation, or that the meaning-making power of human knowledge is null. Rather, the axiomatic point here is that because human knowledge participates ineluctably in the chaotic uncertainty of matter and is reliant on the mysterious spiritual moorings of matter, it cannot deliver an absolute, immutable understanding of anything.

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

The Permanency of Existential Conflict

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

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

44 ABÍMBỌ́LÁ, Wándé. Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos. Dialogue and Alliance, vol. 8, no. 2, p. 86, 1994. ABÍMBỌ́LÁ, Wándé. Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora. Roxbury, MA: AIM Books, 1997, p. 173. At a lecture given at Emory University in 2007, Professor Abímbọ́lá restated this point in asserting that, for the Yorùbá, peace is merely an “aberration.” It is also important to be aware of significant differences between indigenous Yorùbá and Yorùbá diasporic perceptions of ebo (sacrifice) and ritual practice. Abímbọ́lá makes the following comments regarding these differences:
Abimbólá’s emphasis on the focal philosophical position of conflict (*ija*, *rogbodiyan*)\(^45\) within the conceptual framework of Yorùbá cosmology provokes questions about the epistemological connection between unpredictability and existential conflict. Chief among these questions is the following: Can the Yorùbá concept of material unpredictability be understood as a re-inscription of the permanency of existential conflict?

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

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

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

**Irresolution**

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

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

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

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

Like the previous creation narrative, this commonly known variant holds that in the primeval era the earth consisted almost entirely of water; small in number, the only extant landmasses were scattered mountains protruding from the water’s surface. Desiring to create “dry land,” Olódúmarè commissioned four hundred Òrìṣà to bring this dry land into existence. Olódúmarè provided each Òrìṣà with dust from Òrun⁴⁸, a chameleon, and a ten-toed hen to aid in the creation process. Ọbáṣálá was specifically chosen by Olódúmarè as the leader of the four hundred commissioned Òrìṣà and was primarily responsible for the creation of the dry land. Assisted by an iron chain given to them by the deity Ògún, the Òrìṣà traveled to Òkè-Àrà (mountain of wonders)⁴⁹, a location well within reach of Ilé-Ifè.

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

After waking from his drunken sleep, Ọbáṣálá discovered what his brother had done. Odùduwà’s opportunistic actions angered Ọbáṣálá. Consequently, Ọbáṣálá incited a fierce conflict with Odùduwà, which was highly unusual given Ọbáṣálá’s reputation as a deity of “peace, order, and clean living”⁵⁰. After observing this conflict, Olódúmarè intervened on behalf of Odùduwà, giving sanction to the initiative he demonstrated in creating the dry land. Olódúmarè acknowledged Odùduwà’s newly-acquired status as the creator of the earth. Concurrently, Olódúmarè also affirmed Ọbáṣálá’s position as the eldest Òrìṣà while recommissioning him as the molder of human forms⁵¹. So ended the dispute between Ọbáṣálá and Odùduwà. The site of the dry land’s creation and expansion is now known as Ifè. Odùduwà eventually became king of Ifè (Ilé-Ifè), holding

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the title of Òlòfin-Ayé (lawgiver to the world)\textsuperscript{52}. Many Yorùbá communities claim Ilé-Ifé as their ancestral home and identify Odúduwà as the progenitor of the Yorùbá people. The Yorùbá also regard Ilé-Ifé as the place from which all life on earth emerged\textsuperscript{53}.

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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54 ABÍMBÓLÁ, Wándé. Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora. Roxbury, MA: AIM Books, 1997, pp. 14-15, 18-19. A recent discussion with Yorùbá linguistic consultant Olabisi Animashaun revealed that in southwestern Nigeria, Awújalé is a title commonly reserved for kings. Moreover, Animashaun stated that the meaning of the words pèrègùné and lélè may be relevant in determining the significance of the word Pèrègùnlé. The word pèrègùn refers to a plant used by trained Yorùbá healers in the preparation of sacred medicines. The word lélè, which means “slender” and/or “malleable,” accurately describes the size and flexible body of the pèrègùn.
entwined that some humans possess the ability to speak bird and animal languages, and vice versa. Moreover, the depth of existential connection between the natural world and the primordial human community is such that trees can take on human form. These trees, along with birds and animals, are included in the affairs of the human world, so much so that they are invited to “important festivals.” This narrative bespeaks an understanding of human existence as a dynamic condition of communal relation with the assorted modes of life comprising the natural world. The world described in the narrative is a world in which human existence is material relation. But intrinsic to material existence is the reality of conflict.

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

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

From a broad social perspective, this decision precipitated a structural shift in material relations characterized by oppositional movement away from cooperation. The significance of this relational shift is apparent upon considering that the human condition and the natural world both gain a certain intelligibility when understood according to an epistemology of conflict. In this epistemology, the human condition and the natural world are knowable as tensive domains of existence struggling against one
another for survival and well-being. However, the perdurance of conflict between these two domains does not necessitate total isolation, nor does it eliminate the possibility of future cooperation. The existential interconnection of the human and natural worlds as spheres of materiality remains. Abímbólá’s discussion is helpful here:

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

Ifá ló firínmòdò jọba.
Ifá ló firínmòdò jọba.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà lò gbé Irínmòdò níyàwọ.
Ifá ló firínmòdò jọba.

It was Ifá who made Irínmòdò a potentate.
It was Ifá who made Irínmòdò a potentate.
It was Ọ̀rúnmìlà who wedded Irínmòdò as a wife.
It was Ifá who made Irínmòdò a potentate55.

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

Olódùmarè, Ilè, and the Bush Rat

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

Ilè’s contentious claim of seniority is puzzling in light of Olódùmarè’s status in other narratives as the original creative impetus behind the existence of Àjàláyé. As Lawal suggests, the meaning of Ilè’s claim gains some clarity when examined in the context of other Yorùbá originary narratives viewing Odùduwà as the “Supreme Goddess” and as an “embodiment” of Òrùn and Ayé\(^{58}\). Consider, for instance, the following point made by Lucas:

In the early myths she [Odùduwà] is credited with the priority of existence . . . She is regarded as having independent existence, and as co-eval with Olórun [Olódùmarè], the Supreme Deity with whom she is associated in the work of creation . . . Odùduwà is known as Ìyá Agbè – ‘Mother of the Gourd’ or ‘Mother of the closed calabash.’ She is represented in a sitting posture, nursing a child. Hence prayers are often addressed to her by would-be mothers\(^{59}\).


\(^{59}\) LUCAS, J. O. The Religion of the Yorùbás. Lagos: CMS Bookshop, 1948, p. 45. Also, many Yorùbá believe that the three Òrìṣà known widely as Èsù (a uniquely powerful Òrìṣà who mediates between the human and spiritual worlds, and between other beings within the spiritual world), Òbátálá, and Ifá have always existed alongside Olódùmarè. ABÌMBỌ́LÁ, Kọ́lá. Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account. Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, pp. 51-52.
One of Lawal’s interviewees, Yorùbá elder D. O. Epega, goes a step further than Lucas, stating that “Odùduà is the Self-Existent Being who created existence. He is both male and female . . . The word Olódùmarè is a praise title of Odùduà”\textsuperscript{60}. Moreover, Yorùbá scholars Idòwú and Bámgbóṣé lend etymological credence to the points made by Lucas and Epega in noting the occurrence of the word \textit{odu} (chief) in the titles \textit{Olódùmarè} and \textit{Odùduwà}\textsuperscript{61}. This observation raises the possibility that both appellations designate the same deity. Lawal makes a similar linguistic observation concerning \textit{Olódùmarè} and \textit{Odùduwà}: “Indeed, Olódùmarè is also known as Elédùwà, which recalls the \textit{duwa} in Odù-duwà. Thus the narrative attributing the creation of the terrestrial world to Odùduwà may very well reflect a divine act of self-extension, identifying Olódùmarè as a sexually biune Supreme Deity”\textsuperscript{62}. The case of \textit{Olódùmarè} and \textit{Odùduwà} as indirectly raised by Ilè’s conflictual challenge of \textit{Olódùmarè}’s authority is a prime example not only of the tensively complex relational structures of meaning inering within Yorùbá oral culture, but also of the multivalent linguo-conceptual construction of deities found in Yorùbá cosmology. My point is that this tradition of constructing deities through a combination of intricate relational conceptualization and oral theo-philosophical discourse is an \textit{epistemological} tradition that contributes substantially to knowledge production in Yorùbá society.

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

\textsuperscript{60} LAWAL, Babatunde. \textit{Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture}. \textit{African Arts}, v. 41, no. 1, p. 25, 2008.


Conclusion

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

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

Undoubtedly, these insights imply other trajectories yet to be explored. It may not be possible to calculate with any precision the age of the various originary narratives engaged throughout this essay. Some are likely older than others. However, heeding Oyěwùmí’s warning, I have avoided arguing for the “timelessness” of these accounts. This is not to suggest they lack contemporary relevance. The vigorous, continuing presence of Yorùbá-based cultural traditions found in northeastern Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, North America, and elsewhere belies such a suggestion. Yet what must be borne in mind is the structural dynamism of Yorùbá cosmology as
a tradition of thought. In short, Yorùbá epistemology is a living organism with inveterate roots, and should be studied accordingly

References


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