

The Group of Yoruba Gods

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As recently highlighted, Roger Bastide, the great ethnologist would say everything he knew, aware of knowing little, whilst his pupil and friend Pierre Verger, who undoubtedly knew a great deal would more often than not remain silent.

Théodore Monod wrote in the preface of the book *Les Dieux d'Afrique*, Pierre Verger doesn't say or show all because he's also wise, but he delivers us enough ...an eerie glimmer in the fullness of human mystery.

Abstract

This contribution, based on the research carried out by Pierre Fatumbi Verger, intends to look into the following points: who are the Yoruba, the slave trade and syncretism and the Orisha pantheon and their archetypes.

Key-words: Yoruba group, trade slave, Orisha and their archetypes

Introduction

The Orishas are Yoruban gods in Africa (Nigeria, Dahomey nowadays called Benin and Togo), from the origins of their lands, the gods spread with the slave trade to Brazil and to the Antilles.

Twenty years ago, Pierre Verger dedicated to *Orishas, the Yoruban gods in Africa and in the New World*, (1981, Editora Corrupio Ltda, Bahia; 1982, Editions A.M. Metailie, Paris) a fundamental analysis, summa of his first works of (1) ethnological research and photographical documentation, dedicating it *con el carino y amor de Fatumbi to Lydia Cabrera, hija predilecta de Yemaya*.

This contribution, based on the research carried out by Pierre Fatumbi Verger, intends to look into the following points:

- who are the Yoruba
- the slave trade and syncretism
- the Orisha pantheon and their archetypes

Who are the Yoruba

The term Yoruba today regards (S.O. Biobaku, 1973) a linguistic group of several million people that share the same language, culture and tradition that originate from the city of Ife (Nigeria).

Other researchers, in particular J.O. Igue and K.A Obayemi, consider the Yorubans to be a village civilization rather than that of the city, in which each group feels to be more Ijebu, Ife, Ijesa, Ega, Ondo, etc., before feeling Yoruban. Instead with the Odoudoua group there were small settlements in the city of Ifa and subsequent settlements in other centres in far off regions (Dahomey and central Togo) by the Odoudoua descendants.

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Slave trade and syncretism

Due to the slave trade from various areas of Africa towards the New World, the result was a mixture of prisoners that didn't speak the same language, had different life styles and whom amongst themselves believed in distinct religions.

Due to privileged ties between some American countries and certain areas of Africa, in the XVI century Bahia recorded a presence of Bantou Negroes that greatly influenced Brazilian vocabulary, followed by the arrival of a greater number of Africans from the regions of the Dahomeani-gege and from the Yorubanago whose worship rituals seem to have been a model for the ethnic groups that had already established themselves in Bahia.

For three hundred and fifty years the ships transported not only the bodies of the slaves, but also their personalities, their ways of being and behaving and their beliefs.

The slave's religious convictions were immediately put to the test once they had arrived in the New World, where they were forcefully baptized for the *salvation of their souls*, abiding therefore to the religious doctrines of their masters.

The same saints, that had protected the interests of the slave Negro dealers and some of the Negroes that had been transported, subsequently protected the slaves and helped them to mystify their masters, to fool and mislead them on the essence of the dances that they were authorized to perform on Sunday.

Hence, the masters, in seeing the slaves dancing and singing in respect to their own customs, thought that this was simply the means by which the Negroes full of nostalgia showed to be having fun, but weren't aware that in reality, during those reunions the slaves were singing prayers of devotion to their Orishas, their Vodoun and their Oriki (traditional hymns).

We're not aware of the exact moment in which syncretism was able to develop. It seems to have been generally founded on details of religious images that in certain particularities were able to be tied to some aspects of the African gods.

As Nina Rodriguez states; by the end of the XIX century, the Negroes considered their Orishas and the Catholic saints as the same yet different.

Although the Negroes appeared to have converted to Catholicism, they were able to practise their own cults sheltered from external influences.

Furthermore, due to the frequent relations between the African coast and Bahia, this allowed the re-importation of beliefs and customs that could have been forgotten or modified.

The Orisha pantheon and their archetypes

According to L. Frobenius, quoted by PFV, the Yoruban religion, as it was in 1910, gradually became uniform and this uniformity is the result of adaptations and progressive mixes of beliefs that came from various different directions.

PFV states, in commenting Frobenius seventy years later, that an Orisha pantheon that has a clear hierarchy, unique and identical in all the areas of the territory called

Yoruba, is still missing. The local variations show that certain Orishas that hold a dominant position in a particular area are completely unheard of elsewhere. Thus, in regards to this extreme diversity, and to these numerous variations of coexistence amongst the Orishas, we can't but remain sceptical in respect to some theogonic concepts too systematically structured.

For Verger, the religion of the Orishas is closely bound to the notion of family. An enlarged family, that derives from a common ancestor, that binds the living and the dead. Fundamentally the Orisha is a divinised ancestor, that when still alive was able to control a certain number of natural forces, like thunder, wind, fresh and salt waters, or to carry out activities such as hunting, metal work, the knowledge of virtues and the usage of plants. The power of the ancestor – Orisha, would have the ability, after his death to transmit his power to a descendant during trance possession.

The passage from life on earth to the entity of Orisha of these exceptional beings, possessors of a mighty power, would usually occur in a moment of passion and frenzy of which legends preserve the memory.

These divinised ancestors would not have seemingly died from natural death...but would have undergone a mutation, a metamorphosis, a transformation during those moments of emotional crisis provoked by anger, irritation, regret and by other vehement feelings.

The Orisha is a pure force, incorporeal that can't manifest itself to human beings if not by possessing one of them...called elegun...that becomes the vehicle that allows the Orisha to return to earth to receive the signs of respect from the descendents that evoked him.

The Orisha, divinised ancestor, is a family blessing, often transmitted via the paternal lineage. The women of the lineage participate in the ceremonies and may become elegun of the paternal Orisha, however if the woman is married, it's her husband's Orisha that becomes the Orisha of their offspring...The women are in a marginal position inside their acquired family, they are accepted as child bearers but are never fully integrated in their new home.

Whilst in Africa every Orisha is originally related to a city or to a particular territory, once transported to Brazil the Orisha gained an individual nature, alongside the fate of the slave that had been transported and cut off from any relation with his group of origin.

The quality of relationship between an Orisha and an individual is therefore in comparison different between Africa and the New World.

The Orisha worshipping ceremonies in Africa are carried out and maintained by the high priests designated to the cult..., whereas in Brazil each and everyone must take on the responsibility of the Orisha's particular demands.

Furthermore, in each Candomblé terreiro, the last location where the rules of living know-how supremely reign, many personal Orishas are reunited around the Orisha of the terreiro, symbol of the gathering around the original Orisha that the diaspora has dispersed.

According to Gisele Cossard, if one were to examine the initiated, grouping them up by Orisha, one can affirm that often they possess common traits, both at a physical and psychological level. The bodies seem to carry, more or less profoundly depending on the individual, traces of the mental and psychical forces that animates them.

Olodumare, Supreme God

A Superior God reigns above the Orishas, Olodumare, inaccessible distant god, indifferent to the prayers and to the faith of man. He's beyond human comprehension, neither moral nor right, he floats above these circumstances. No cult is devoted to him. Olodumare created the Orishas to govern and supervise the world. It's to them that man should devote his prayers and offerings. Olodumare accepts to resolve the contrasts that can develop among the Orishas.

Eshou

The archetype of Eshou is very common in our society in which there are numerous people with ambivalent personalities, both good and bad, but with an inclination towards the bad side, unreasonableness, obscenity, depravation and corruption; people that have the ability of inspiring trust and taking advantage of this, but on the other hand have the capacity to understand, in an intelligent manner, the problems of others and to give shrewd advice, with such zeal equal to the hope of being compensated, the misleading intellectual lucubration and political intrigues match him well and are a secure guarantee for a successful life.

Ogoun

The archetype of Ogoun is that of violent, quarrelsome, impulsive people that are not able to forgive the offence they receive. They energetically pursue their actions and are not easily discouraged. In difficult times they triumph, when most give up and lose hope. Their personality can change, going from being furiously angry to the nicest of behaviours. They are impetuous and sumptuous and often annoy others due to their lack of discretion when doing them a favour, but their outspokenness and intentional sincerity make it difficult to bear a grudge.

Oshossi

Oshossi is the archetype of vivid people, quick, always alert and in action. They are full of initiative touching on new discoveries and new activities. They are responsible and dedicate care to their family, generous, hospitable and orderly, but they love in an extreme manner to change residence and find new forms of existence, to the detriment of a harmonious and calm family life.

Ossanyn

This is the archetype of people with a balanced personality, they are able to conserve and control their sentiments and emotions. They do not allow their likes

and dislikes to intervene in their decisions or influence their opinions of people or events. Their extraordinary resource of creative energy and passive resistance helps them reach their goals. They do not have narrow and conventional views of morale and justice. Their judgement of the value of things and people is less based on the notion of good and bad than of efficacy.

Shango

This is the archetype of people that are volitive, energetic, haughty and aware of their own real or supposed rank. They can be gentlemanly and very courteous, but don't tolerate any minor contradiction and in these cases can lash out in violent bursts of anger. They are sensitive to the charm of people of the opposite sex, they behave with tact and pleasantness at social gatherings but if irritated will act beyond decency. The highly developed sense of dignity that they have makes them behave both in a severe yet benevolent way, depending on the mood of the moment, but generally they manage to conserve a profound and constant sense of justice.

Oya-Yansan

This is the archetype of audacious, strong and authoritative women. In certain circumstances they can be faithful and loyal, but if hindered in their actions or projects they will brake out in extreme anger. Their sensual and voluptuous temperament drags them into frequent and multiple out of marriage affairs, without restraint and decency although being jealous of those they betray.

Oshoun

This is the archetype of gracious and elegant women, with a passion for jewels, perfumes and expensive clothes. They are the symbol of beauty and feminine charm, both voluptuous and sensual, but in a more reserved manner than Oya. They try not to interfere with public opinion which they consider to be of great importance. Under their gracious and seductive appearance they hide a very strong will power and a great desire for social climbing.

Oba

This is the archetype of women of value but that are misunderstood; their slightly virile mannerisms lead them into an active form of feminism, their militant and aggressive attitude is consequence to their unlucky sentimental relationships that they have gone through. Their unsuccessfulness in love is often due to jealousy. They generally manage to compensate their frustrations through material things. The greed in earning more, the care they take in not losing any of their material goods gives them a guaranteed success.

Yemanja

The description of this archetype has been borrowed from Lydia Cabrera, who was the direct daughter of Yemanjá and surely one of the most competent in regards to the topic.

The daughters of Yemanjá are of strong will power, scrupulous, haughty and sometimes even arrogant; they have a sense of hierarchy, they are respected but formal; they put their friendships to test, a considerable effort is taken for their forgiveness, and once they have forgiven they don't forget. They share the troubles of others, and are both maternal and conscientious. Without being as flirtatious as Oshoun, they love luxury, blue sumptuous fabrics and expensive jewellery. They tend towards the magnificent, even if their daily resources don't really allow for them to splash out in such a manner.

Oshoumare

This is the archetype of people who desire to be rich. They are patient and persevere in their actions in order to reach their goals. Their duplicity can be due to the androgynous nature of their god. When successful, they become pompous and proud, and will show off their splendour. To a certain extent they can also be generous, and will give a helping hand to those in need.

Obalouye

This is the archetype of those with masochistic traits, they love to show sufferance and misfortune for which they are secretly satisfied for, and are unable to feel this satisfaction when life is good to them. They can reach an enviable wealth, becoming extremely prosperous, then out of the blue reject all of this for imaginary qualms. Even though active, they are able to dedicate themselves to the well being of others to the extent of putting aside their own interests and vital needs.

Nanan Bouroukou

This is the archetype of those that behave in a calm, benevolent, dignified and gentle manner. They have a slow pace in completing their work as they have an omnipresent feeling about them that they have eternity at their disposal to complete their tasks. They love children and educate them in an extremely sweet and kind manner, as they behold the leniency of grandparents. They behave with grandeur and mastery. Their balanced reactions concerning decision making keeps them firmly tied to wisdom and justice.

Oshala

This archetype belongs to calm, trustworthy, respectable and reserved people, they have a strong and adamant willpower that cannot be influenced. In certain circumstances they don't modify their plans and projects, even if others advise them beforehand of the possible consequences that they might come across, they will accept without complaints any difficult or bitter situations that they are confronted with.

Orisanla (the Great Orisha) or Obatala (the king of the white tunic) holds the unique and indisputable position of being the most important Orisha, the highest amongst the Yoruba. He was the first to be created by Oludumare, the Supreme God, that gave him the task of creating the world with the power to suggest and to achieve.

A recollection of Pierre Fatumbi Verger

Levy-Bruhl was extremely important for De Martino, but at the same time he criticized the idea that at the origins of civilization there was a beginning of thought that wasn't governed by thinking itself. (Gennaro Sasso, interview to Antonio Gnoli, La Repubblica, 16 June 2002, pag. 29)

I met Fatumbi in Dahomey in 1966.

I was then a young sociologist just graduated from the University of Rome, I was working for the European Fund for the Development on the coordination of preliminary studies aimed at the elaboration of a development project concerning an area of 40,000 hectares of land in the Agonvy region (southern Dahomey, previously western French-Africa): statistical research, food and agriculture, time usage, health measures, etc.

I was going back and forth between Itkedé, where I lived in an agricultural farm of the IRASHO and the two capitals of Dahomey, Cotonou and Porto Novo, Cotonou being more westernised with government offices, an airport, hotels and restaurants, Porto Novo being more African and traditional.

One day whilst in my house in Itkedé, a colonial villa which was situated inside an experimental plantation of palm oil trees, surrounded by the villas of the Belgian agronomists that had escaped from Congo, I received a visit from a French gentleman, Pierre Verger; he was then about 65 years old and I had just turned 23, I could have been his son, but also his grandson: he had gentle manners, he spoke to me about his work as an ethnologist, his research, his books, his photographs and above all he asked me about my work, the reason of my stay in Dahomey, in particular in Itkedé, the significance of the highly praised European investments for development.

I recall this shred of conversation:

Me- Children die early in life, they have few chances of living, with our aid they'll be able to eat in a healthier way, they'll be able to be cured with the right medicine by local doctors, they'll live in more humane conditions, etc.

PV- Then they'll all die anyway, this is our destiny.

Me- Yes, sure, but a destiny can be somehow overpowered, the social economic development can especially contribute to this..

PV- It can only contribute in destroying the balance on which these societies are based, overturning traditions, customs, religiousness, upsetting the fundamentals of traditional communities.

Each time I found myself conversing with Pierre Verger I was taken aback by the calm, the sweetness with which he elaborated his thoughts and by the condemnation that my actions received: he was gentle but firm, extremely rigid in defending a world to which he had consecrated his whole self, to the point of becoming *Fatumbi*.

Since then, 35 years have gone by, the European Community financed the Agonvy project, that achieved an oil mill, 7,000 hectares of palm oil plantations and 7,000 hectares for the purpose of food agriculture, four villages, a hospital, schools, roads, bridges, etc.

What did the development created by these new conditions determine, did *Fatumbi*'s prophecy come true? His intellectual pessimism, matured through years of fieldwork research found confirmation in the outcome of events, or was it a romantic and decadent love towards man, woman, ethnic groups that by being simply touched by his glance were to be protected forever, as an infantile world, from the flattery of the glances of others?

This is the point, the challenge that *Fatumbi* gave Pierre Verger that we must acknowledge and transmit to those that will come after us, we must love the object of our research, till it becomes a living entity.

This we owe to *Fatumbi*, while celebrating the centenary of Pierre Verger's birth.

From Pierre *Fatumbi* Verger we have his extraordinary work, his books and his photographs, the Foundation of Bahia in Brazil, above all we are left with his fieldwork research, in the African villages and in Central America, in the archives, a diachronic research, synchronic and multi-medial (the thousands of photographs that narrate the Orishas and the worshippers, on both sides of the ocean, thus almost deleting more than three hundred years of slave trade and building a bridge between cultures and religions far away in distance but close in their roots and inspirations).

Above all from Pierre *Fatumbi* Verger, we are left with the memorable and touching pages in which he narrates the stories of ships, boats, steamboats with the names of saints and of the efforts of millions of human beings, men and women, to conserve their identity through the faith to their gods even with the adhesion to different religions and their new elaboration, an introduction to that syncretism, which Pierre *Fatumbi* Verger was both a son and cantor of an integral world of both men and Orishas.

In 1934, during summer lessons in Freiburg, Martin Heidegger stated: *if we pose the question of the essence of history we are opposed with the fact that our statement of history, being the characteristic trait of men is arbitrary. Even so, Negroes are men, but they don't have a history. There's even a history of animals and plants, which is thousands of years old, even more so than the history of man. And not only does life have a history, but so does the whole earth, as geology clearly shows.*

This therefore means: 1) even in non human contexts there is a history; 2) inside the human context there may be a lack of history.

Thanks to the works of Pierre Fatumbi Verger, this world associated with the slave trade and the virtues of syncretism, of mimicry and mestizo, this world of men and Orishas, is part of the human community and not just a simple chapter of ethnological or geological analysis, in peace and respect to the philosopher Martin Heidegger.

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