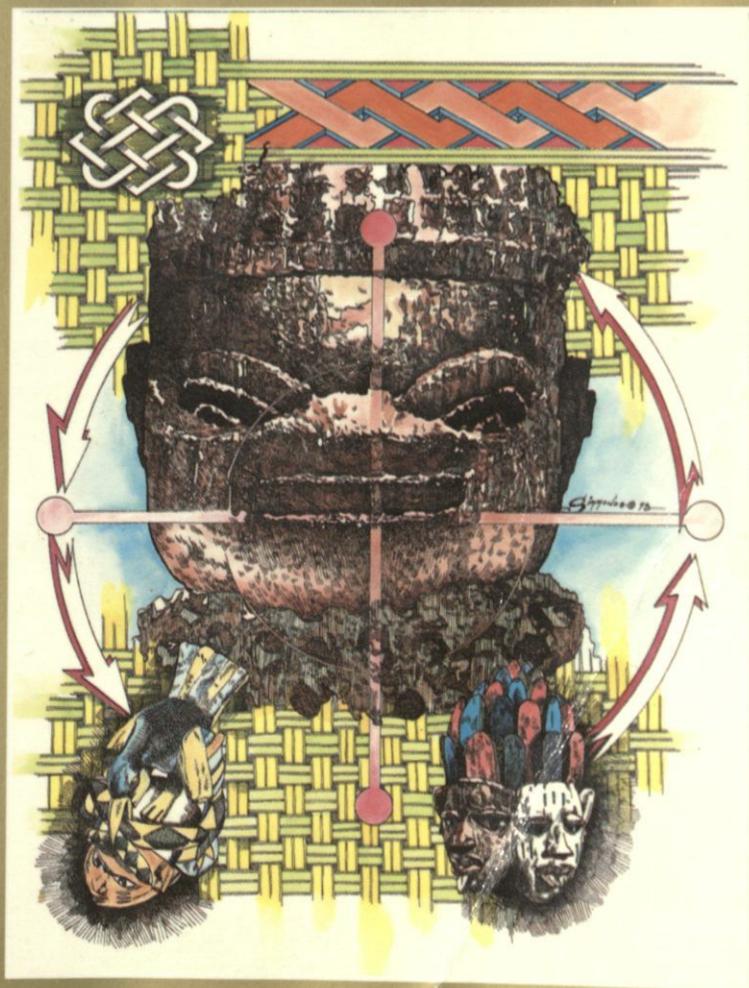


The
H · A · N · D · B · O · O · K
of
Yoruba Religious Concepts



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Chapter 1

THE YORUBA HISTORY

IN ORDER TO STUDY the religious and cultural definitions of the Yoruba it is important to be somewhat versed in the historical conditions that gave birth to them. Students or aspirants of any religious system are guided by the priestly order and teachers of that system. They are educated in the geographical and political dynamics which clearly have influenced the beginnings and the expansion of their religion. The same holds true for Yoruba aspirants—especially the New World descendants. Although the aspirants seek religious heritage, as well as ancestral origins, many know little or nothing of the history of Yorubaland in Nigeria, West Africa.

As an introduction to this area let it be stated that the origins of the people and culture known as Yoruba are so wrapped in antiquity that to exactly say where and when it all began is impossible. However, the sincere attempt to present a viable description will be undertaken.

The Yoruba history begins with the migration of an East African population across the trans-African route leading from the mid-Nile river area to the mid-Niger. Basil Davidson writes, "... migrating peoples undoubtedly used this route from times that were exceedingly remote ... that two thousand years ago and more the climate and vegetation would have treated trans-African travelers in a gentler way than they do now."¹ Davidson continues, "... they came this

¹ Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1959), p. 60.

way [the route] from the earliest of times; and their beliefs and their inventions came with them."²

Archaeologists, according to M. Omoleya, inform us that the Nigerian region was inhabited more than forty thousand years ago, or as far back as 65,000 B.C.³ This civilization has been deemed, in part, the Nok culture. The Nok culture was visited by the "Yoruba group," between 2000 and 500 B.C. The group was led, according to Yoruba historical accounts, by King Oduduwa, who settled somewhat peacefully in the already established Ile-Ife—the sacred city of the indigenous people. This time period is known as the Bronze Age, indicating that the civilization of both groups were at relatively high levels.

Olumide J. Lucus proclaims, "The Yoruba, during antiquity, lived in ancient Egypt before migrating to the Atlantic coast. He uses as demonstration the similarity or identity of languages, religious beliefs, customs and names of persons, places and things."⁴ The key point, or focus, in respect to Yoruba religious evolution, is that the Egyptian order, coupled with the earlier peoples, produced the more defined statement of what makes Yoruba.

In the *History of West Africa A.D. 1000-1800*, Onwubiko states that, "According to tradition, Oduduwa, the chief ancestor and first king of the Yoruba settled at Ile-Ife. From this point his descendants became the kings and queens of Yoruba cities and territories."⁵ The greatest of Oduduwa's descendants was Oranmiyan who became the Alafin or ruler of the Oyo state somewhere around 1400 A.D. Oranmiyan's armies marched across the Southern Sudan and penetrated deep into the great tropical forest conquering

² *The Lost Cities of Africa*, p. 60.

³ Michael Omoleya, *Certificate History of Nigeria* (London & Lagos: Longman Group, 1986), p. 15.

⁴ Cheik Anta Dio, *Precolonial Black Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, co-published with Lawrence Hill, 1992), p. 216.

⁵ Onwubiko, KBC, *History of West Africa A.D. 1000-1800* (Onitsha, Nigeria: Africana-FEP Publisher, 1967), pp. 134-135.

and laying the foundations of the Yoruba Empire. Centuries of spectacular glory and achievement followed the reign of Oranmiyan. It was during this great era that Yoruba people re-established Ile-Ife as the sacred-spiritual capital and Oyo as the governmental seat.

The Enslavement Period

Onwubiko's research indicates that "the wars of expansion (amongst the Yoruba) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not fought to procure slaves for export to the coast but for local service on Yoruba farms. It was not until the eighteenth century that wars to provide slaves for sale to Europeans became important."⁶

Enslavement from European hands began in the 15th and 16th centuries. Around 1530 A.D., the Portuguese began to transport Africans from the West Coast to Spanish mines and plantations in the New World. Later, other European nations became involved. France, England, Holland, and Spain were all very active in the brutal manipulation and deception that somehow became known as the "slave trade."

Islamic jihads (holy wars), incited by Arabic religious fervor, also swept through Africa clear to the western coastal regions. This era lasted from about A.D. 641 through the 19th century. The trans-Saharan slave trade flourished. The Yoruba Nation, now devastated and depleted of its most natural resource—people—eventually collapsed.

It is important to note that the greatest percentage of Africans enslaved for New World labor came from the Yoruba nation. It is also important to note that a large percentage of those enslaved were war-political prisoners of elite classes of soldiers and warrior-priests. As a result, the New World became inundated with a people knowledgeable of their culture and who were initiated members of its

⁶ *History of West Africa*, p. 136.

higher teachings. It is of no small wonder that Yoruba culture became the dominant theme of African-American transference.

African descendants were transported to New World countries like Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and other islands of the West Indies; to Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela in South America; and finally to the colonies and states of North America.

The crossing of the Atlantic Ocean to reach these destinations has been deemed The Middle Passage or the Triangle Trade. Three ports were involved; one was in Nigeria, the other in the West Indies, the other in Europe. It has been estimated that over 75 million captives were taken during the four or five centuries we call the enslavement period.

When Europeans arrived on African soil, the Judeo-Christian missionary zeal was planted as it would be later on American soil. Conversion of Africans to Christianity in spite of enslavement continued. The other side of the reality is that African people were solidly encased in the religion of their own culture and the zeal to implant it also existed—especially among the Yoruba. Maureen Warner-Lewis in her book, *Guinea's Other Suns*, quotes a study from Mobogunji and Omer-Cooper 1971-1977, "The fact that the Yoruba were dragged into the slave trade in such huge numbers and so soon before the trade was brought to an end had several important consequences . . . Their culture and religion tended to dominate the sub-culture of the slave society and to submerge and absorb into itself surviving elements of African culture."⁷

There also came into being a type of homogenization or synthesis of the religions. From the African perspective there arose a special Christian interpretation based on African spirituality and practice. Warner-Lewis continues that: "Some [Africans] denounced the traditional gods; oth-

⁷ Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Guinea's Other Suns* (Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 1991), p. 1.

ers did not even credit their existence. On the other hand, a large number maintained traditional beliefs and practices alongside Christianity, using one spiritual resource to supplement and complement the other."⁸ For a people stripped of their fundamental social structures and mores, the concepts of spirit and religion have miraculously survived. The African maintained the "Africanness" of religious being through spirituals; getting the holy ghost (a form of possession); shouting; speaking in tongues; intense preaching, etc. In general, the African soul was not extinguished, but simply transfigured to meet the Euro-social pressures under New World bondage.

Robert Farris Thompson writes in his introduction to *Flash of the Spirit* that, "The Yoruba are black Africa's largest population, and are creators of one of the premier cultures of the world. The Yoruba believe themselves descended from goddesses and gods, from an ancient spiritual capital, Ile-Ife. They show their special concern for the proprieties of right living through their worship of major goddesses and gods, each essentially a unique manifestation of ashe . . . only the most widely and important (deities) survived the vicissitudes of the Atlantic Trade."⁹

These important deities bear the name of orisha, which are the angelic forces of Yoruba context. Among them are Eshu-Elegba, Obatala, Oshun, Ogun, Yemoja, Shango, Oya, and others too numerable to mention. Each require special worship, song, and sacrifice. The ability to keep these deities alive in the world-reality of the Yoruba led to the conscious masking of them behind Christian saints and social-ritual performances. Catholicism, with its numerous patron-saints, made the masking easy. And, since the Portuguese and Spanish were Catholic and also major enslavers of Yoruba elite prisoners, the tradition survived virtually intact.

⁸ *Guinea's Other Suns*, p. 51.

⁹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. xv.

Among the Euro-speaking colonies, religious sects known as Santeria in Puerto Rico, Candomble in Brazil, Shango in Trinidad, Voodun in Haiti, and Lucumi in Cuba were formed. The Euro-influences, although great, could not deter the African descendants from secretly maintaining their tradition. Even the language of the Yoruba remained, as did cultural mannerisms.

English Protestants, also involved in the slave era, had greater success in "domesticating" the African. Lack of numerous patron saints in the religious construct made it difficult to mask the Yoruba religion. Lack of tropical environments in North America made it difficult for the African to maintain cultural relativity. Finally, the emphasis on inbreeding the African-American slaves brought an end to fresh ideas and religious fervor from newly arrived enslaved prisoners.

Today, many of Africa's descendants are openly embracing the Yoruba faith and practice. Because of political struggles, especially in the 1950s, New World people from the Caribbean found their way to the United States. They were mainly from Cuba, which is often called "little Africa." The Cubans brought with them the Yoruba religion and practice as they had interpreted it. Now, African descendants in the Americas are stepping beyond the Hispanic interpretations, and are returning to the more unadulterated form of life and ancestral religion known as Yoruba. Serious aspirants of this religious movement have connected themselves with Nigerian influenced high-priests, known as babalawos, who now reside in the United States.

Chapter 3

THE ORISHA AS ANGELIC FORCES

THE YORUBA contend that the study of nature is foremost. Nature is viewed as the manifestation of Oludumare's Essence through degrees of material substance. That essence, translated as ashe, is the inherent force of all creation. The emphasis of such study or worship is not centered on the physical object or tangible, but on the life-force energy that brings about its form. The tangible object is but a symbol of the eternal existence that bore it.

Oludumare/Olorun is in all things as the ashe is the primal essence of all things. It is not the tree, the rock, the statue that African ancestors revere and worship but the deep energy that brought about its being. In maintaining the "nature religion" the ancestors were able to keep and also strengthen the very real connection between all things and human beings.

This concept is basic and fundamental in respect to religious involvement. Oludumare, the Creator, must be seen in all things. Humans, devoid of oppressive ego, must see themselves as also part of the creation, and behave accordingly. In respect to the orisha, it is to be understood that as "angelic forces" they, too, are a part of nature. As angels, they are comprised of greater heavenly properties and are closer to the divine source of Existence. Their ability to act on behalf of human beings is generally stated as divine intervention. Such intervention is brought about by divination, belief, faith, prayer, song and praise, dance, ritual, and sacrifice inclusive. This "bringing about" is a dual endeavor as both priest and devotee need follow certain

guidelines and practices to efficaciously heal or correct a corrupted situation.

Orisha as a term, is actually the combination of two Yoruba words. *Ori* which is the reflective spark of human consciousness embedded in human essence, and *sha* which is the ultimate potentiality of that consciousness to enter into or assimilate itself into the divine consciousness.

The human consciousness needs to pass through stages of development in order to attain the highest levels. The orisha symbolize the forces and forms of human divinity potential. In *Her Bak*, it is written that, "the Neters [divine beings-Orishas] are an expression of the principles and functions of divine power manifesting in nature. Their names and images as pictured in the myths define such principles and functions and they are offered that the student may learn to know them and seek them in him/her self."¹ This concept maintained by the ancients of Egypt and West Africa is evident, though somewhat dismissed, in all forms of religious and spiritual development.

"The Yoruba maintain that worship of the orisha assist in the development of *iwa-pele* or balanced character and balanced attitude. That the most important purpose of a person on earth is to come and exhibit that character and attitude."² Religion, as a custom of worship, is not man's purpose, but only a means to an end while the end itself is *iwa-pele*. Thus, the fundamental reality in respect to the divinity of self and the heavenly forces is that of pure and enlightened character development. This is the premise of true orisha involvement. The connection between one's consciousness (*ori*) and one's behavior (*iwa-pele*) is clearly seen as reciprocal and relative. That is, the more enlightened one's consciousness becomes, in respect to the divine, the

¹ Isha Schwaller de Lubicz, *Her-Bak: Egyptian Initiate* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1982), p. 27.

² S. Popoola, "Life: Its Purpose and Hereafter" in *Orunmila*, Issue 3 (June 1987), p. 13

more one's behavior reflects the divine. Thus, the individual is deemed saintly or priestly in their development.

The Orisha

Ori: G. Okemyiwa and A. Fubunmi state, "the word *Ori* has many meanings. [literally] *Ori* means head. It means the apex of all things, the highest of any endeavor. . . . In the human body *Ori* is divided into two—the physical head and the spiritual head. . . . The spiritual head is [also] subdivided into two—the *Ori Apari*—inner [the internal spiritual *Ori*] and the *Ori Apere* (the sign of an individual's personal god (orisha))."³ The *Ori Ode* (physical head), the *Ori Inu* (the internal spirit), and the *Iponri* (the soul space of the inner-self) are more noted definitions of the *Ori*. It is revealed in the *odu*, *Ogunda* that "no god blesses a person without consent of their *Ori*. One whose *Ori* has accepted the sacrifice is one who should rejoice exceedingly." In all forms of ritual sacrifice offerings are first placed to the center or top of the head. This is due to *Ori* and the appeasement of *Ori's* divine nature.

Obatala: "Obatala, also known as *Orisha-nla*, *Orishaala*, *Ogiyan* is deemed the arch-divinity of Yorubaland. Obatala represents the idea of ritual purity and ethical purity, symbolized by immaculate whiteness associated with him—inside walls of temples are washed white, emblems are kept in white containers, and white robes, ornaments, and beads are for his priest and priestesses."⁴ Obatala is viewed as the most intelligent and even-tempered of the orishas. Not only is he the "father of the orisha," but also the moulder of human form on Earth. He is the creative sculptor that forms the embryonic body of infants inside the womb. It was

³ "Life: It's Purpose and Hereafter" in *Orunmila*, p. 15.

⁴ George Simpson, *Yoruba Religions and Medicines of Ibadan* (Ibadan University Press, 1980), p. 3.

Obatala who first formed humankind out of the Earth's clay. Obatala is Oludumare's prime emissary on Earth. The followers of Obatala and others appeal to him for children, prosperity, the avenging of wrongs, and the curing of illness and deformities. They bring prayer and offerings to the priest and priestesses who present them to the altars or shrines on behalf of the followers.

Eshu-Elegba: Eshu, as a divinity, is viewed primarily as the powerful holder of the ashe or creative potency of the other orisha. For this reason all sacrifices and offerings must be shared with Eshu in some manner. He is the messenger divinity who delivers sacrifices to the orisha from humans and from one orisha to another. Eshu holds a conflictual position among humans and orisha alike, for he is the one who "tries their souls." Eshu tempts, thwarts, and disrupts. If all tests are passed he recreates. It is because Eshu is non-discriminating in enforcing the "laws of being," punishing, or rewarding, as whatever the case may be, that he is so respected and revered. He is in close proximity to all forces—positive and negative alike—as he is the prime negotiator between them. Awolalu writes, "The Yoruba tradition holds that Eshu maintains relationships with the super-sensible world and with human beings on Earth. With regard to the super-sensible world, he maintains close relationship with Orunmila who is notable for his wisdom and who knows the wishes of Deity and divinities."⁵

It is interesting to note that in Yorubaland, as stated by Awolalu, that "Eshu has no regular priesthood because he is associated with all the other divinities. But, whenever these other divinities are worshipped, due homage is paid to him."⁶ Images of Eshu (generally constructed of clay, wood, stone, or concrete and adorned with cowries shells) are

⁵ Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (White Plains, NY: Longman Group, 1979), p. 29.

⁶ *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, p. 30.

found in every Yoruba home regardless of the priestly order, or status of the family. Also, Eshu is to be propitiated not only first before orisha, but also before Egun (ancestors).

Oshun: Oshun is the orisha of unconditional love, receptivity and diplomacy. She is known for her sensuality, fine artistic development and beauty. Oshun is a river divinity symbolizing clarity and flowing motion. She has powers to heal with cool water and to divine based on her dream revelations and sensual perception. Oshun is said to have many sides. On the one hand she can be very short-tempered and irritable on the other, she can be calm and fluid. Either could be the case depending on the devotee and/or the nature of the situation.

Oshun is also the divinity of fertility and feminine essence. Women appeal to her for child-bearing and for the alleviation of female disorders. She is fond of babies and is sought if a baby becomes ill. Oshun is reflected in brass, gold, and shining gems. She is known for her love of honey.

Ogun: Ogun is the divinity of iron and all that iron becomes. He is the patron of blacksmiths, hunters, and warriors. Ogun is also the divinity of clearing paths, specifically in respect to building civilizations. He is also depicted as the divinity of mechanization. Ogun is the essence of divine justice and truth on Earth. Devotees swear upon him in solemn reverence. Known for his keen insight into the hearts of men he is the liberator or executioner in the world.

Yemoja: Yemoja is the divinity of all the oceans. She is said to be the mother of all orisha and expresses her mothering throughout the earthly and heavenly realms. Yemoja is the matriarchal head of the cosmic universe. She is the amniotic fluid in the womb of the pregnant woman, as well as, the breasts which nurture. She is known to be very stern and temperamental and expresses the protective energies of the

feminine force. Being of the earth-essence, she is proficient in the secret arts and will use them to protect her devotees.

Oya: Oya is the divinity that guards the cemetery. More specifically she protects the souls of the departed as they journey onward. Oya is viewed as a warrior with great strength. She stands well on her own, but is usually in the company of her counterpart Shango. Oya is also recognized for her psychic abilities which manifest in the winds. She is the deity of the storm and hurricanes. Oya is often seen as the deity of death, but upon deeper realization, she is the deity of rebirth as things must die so that new beginnings arise.

Shango: Shango is the deified Alafin (ruler) of medieval Oyo said to have hung himself because of his over-indulgence. His elevation to the orisha realm was brought about by his devout followers. They merged him with the deity of lightning and fierce retribution known as Jakuta. Shango's symbol is the double ax mounted on the head of the holy statues or dance wands (Oshe Shango). Shango is the orisha of the drum and dance. He possesses the ability to transform base substance into that which is pure and valuable. His devotees approach him for legal problems, protection from enemies, and to make bad situations better. Often viewed as a bit earthy, Shango is revered and earnestly listened to for he speaks only once and is prone to be temperamental.



"In Africa, it is believed that divinities or gods are personifications of God's activities and manifestations. God's activities and manifestations are also discernible in natural phenomenon and objects, nature spirits, deified heroes and mythological figures."⁷ As the study of orisha intensifies it becomes apparent that throughout Yorubaland every aspect

⁷ M. Duko, "God & Godling's in African Ontology" in *Orunmila*, Issue 5 (June 1990), p. 49.

of nature is a vehicle to god-consciousness. Although the major seven have survived the Middle Passage, they were not the only ones.

The Yoruba orisha are examined in tables 2-4 on pages 29 and 30. The depictions show concise views of those attributes most generally related to by New World practitioners. The general notion is that this is where the involvement with orisha stops. Aspirants who proclaim their affiliations based on worldly intentions must guard against delusion. Delusion leads to witchcraft or the manipulation of the ashe in order to satisfy the lower-base self. As devotees study orisha, they must be able to remain true to the major objectives of Yoruba faith—to express divine character, intent, and attitude (*iwa-pele*). Devotees are not to rest on preconceived notions as to what the orisha are about and attempt to “act like” the orisha.

3.19 from ✱ This is unwise. Through devotion to the orisha ordained as messenger, helper, and patron, the ashe will “act through” the devotee for the sole purpose of transformation, purification, and enlightenment. This ashe is to be channeled by the devotee through the process known as *aba*, which brings forth the manifestation of light into the world.

As New World Yoruba initiates expand their awareness, more orisha are revealed. A list of other orisha are included with one of their many attributes:

Olokun: *Orisha of the depths of the ocean.*

Oshoosi: *Orisha of warriors and hunters.*

Osun: *The staff of the babalawo symbolizing health, wisdom and protection.*

Ibeji: *Twins symbolizing the dual aspect of the cosmos.*

Oba: *River orisha.*

Aganyu: *Orisha of the volcano and core of the earth.*

Oko: *Orisha of the farm.*

Erinle: *Orisha of medicine.*

Osain: *Orisha of the plants and herbs.*

Babaluaiye: *Orisha of sickness and epidemics.*

Table 2. The Seven Major Orisha.

ORISHA	ATTRIBUTES
Obatala	Creator of Human Form, Elder of the Orisha, Wisdom, Purity, Morality, Strategy, High Intelligence, Peacemaker, Father, God of the White Cloth, Silver.
Elegba	Messenger of the Orisha, Courier of Offerings to the Orisha, Policeman of the Yoruba Cosmology, Guardian of the Cross-roads, Holder of Ashe (power) among the Orisa, Laterite Stone.
Ogun	Orisha of Iron, War, Creator of Civilizations, Courage, Strength, Justice and Oaths, Executioner, Pathmaker, Force, Stabilization, Security, Protection, Vehicles and Tools.
Yemoja	Motherhood, Mother of Waters, Family, Sexuality, Sorcery, Primal Waters, Nurturer.
Oshun	Sensuality, Fine Arts and Humanities, Love, Beauty, Graciousness, Gracefulness, Money, Sorcery, Luxury, Brass, Gold, Cowrie, Rivers, Intuition, Divination.
Shango	Kingly, Stately, Orator, Sorcery, Virility, Dance, Music (drums), Masculinity, Business, Fire, Lightning, Stones, Protector / Warrior, Magnetism.
Oya	Tempest, Guardian of the Cemetery, Winds of Change, Warrior, Hurricanes, Storms, Death, Progression.

Table 3. Color, Number, and Natural Environment.

ORISHA	COLOR	NUMBER*	NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Obatala	White	8, 24	Mountains, Woods
Elegba	Red and Black White and Black	1, 3, 21	Woods, Crossroads, Gateways
Yemoja	Blue and Crystal	7	Oceans, Lakes (salt water)
Oshun	Yellow	5	Rivers, Lakes (fresh water)
Ogun	Green and Black	3	Railroads, Woods, Forges
Shango	Red	6, 12	Places struck by light- ning, base of trees
Oya	Reddish-brown, Rust, Earth-tones	9	Cemetery, places hit by Hurricanes, Storms

* Numbers of the orisha may also include their multiples. Colors may be taken in shades.

Table 4. Physical Correspondences.

ORISHA	PHYSICAL CORRESPONDENCES
Obatala	brain, bones, white fluids of the body
Elegba	sympathetic nervous system, para sympathetic nervous system
Yemoja	womb, liver, breasts, buttocks
Oshun	circulatory system, digestive organs, elimination system, pubic area (female)
Ogun	heart, kidney (adrenal glands), tendons, and sinews
Shango	reproductive system (male), bone marrow, life force or chi
Oya	lungs, bronchial passages, mucous membranes