

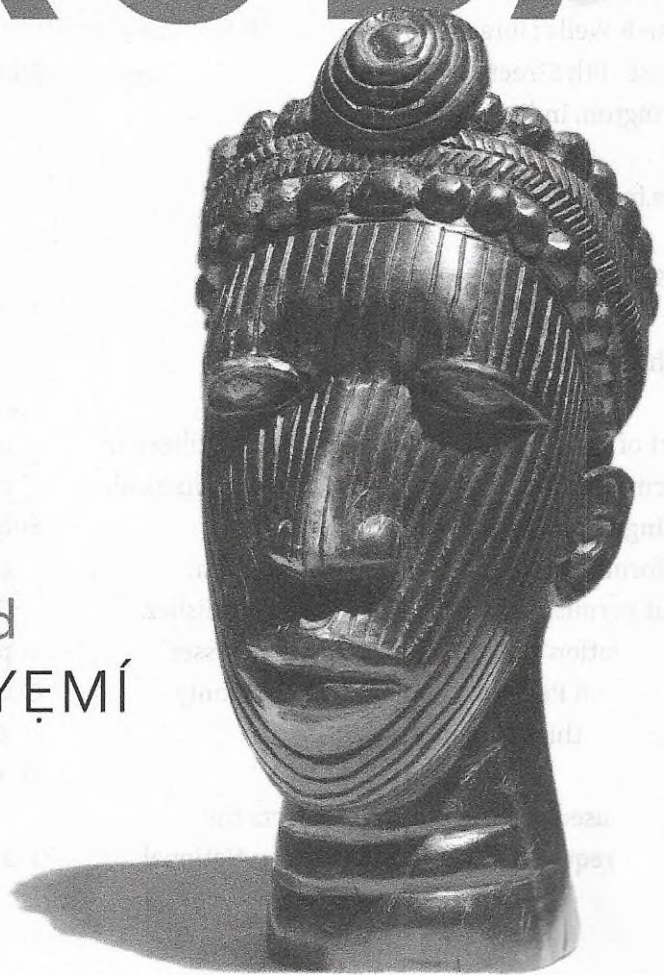
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE  
**YORUBA**

EDITED BY  
TOYIN FALOLA *and*  
AKINTUNDE AKINYEMI



# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE YORÙBÁ

EDITED BY  
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*Samuel Àjàyí Crowther (1809-1891),  
Samuel Johnson (1846-1901),  
Henry Carr (1863-1945), and  
Adébóyè Babalọlá (1926-2008),  
in memoriam*

*A kì í ní ẹgbàá nílẹ̀, kí a tún mǎa wá ẹgbàá ròde;  
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni a kì í ní ọkọ nílẹ̀, kí a tún mǎa fi ọwọ̀ kó imí.*

Only the promise of a greater fortune should tempt one  
to neglect what one already has.

—Yorùbá proverb

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and can help in rectifying misfortunes. They worship Ọ̀rúnmìlà and consult him for the solutions to various problems. This worship and consultation is done via the office of a Babaláwo, an Ifá priest who performs divination using a divining tray and other emblems. Other prominent divinities include Ọ̀gún (the god of iron and war), Ọ̀sanyìn (the god of medicine), Ẓàngó, Ẓànpònná (the god of smallpox), Ọ̀rìṣà-Ọ̀ko (the patron god of farmers), and others, all of whom act on behalf of the Supreme Being in the administration of the world. From conception to death, life is marked by consultations of oracles and the performance of prescribed sacrifices, or *ẹ̀bọ*. Events and seasons like marriage, erecting a building, health care, and planting and harvest seasons are founded and sealed by means of communing with the relevant invisible deity who has charge of the particular affair at hand.

An inextricable link exists between visible and invisible forces in Yorùbá culture because divinities and spirits administer every phenomenon and aspect of creation in which human beings, flora, and fauna interact. For instance, the earth (*ilẹ̀*), which serves various purposes in nature, is believed to be inhabited by a spirit. According to A. A. Lawal, land is “the sacred soil of the ancestors, the channel of communication between the dead and the living. It is the origin of royal power and the basis of health and prosperity.” Sacrifices and libations are offered at planting seasons, or whenever a corpse is to be interred, in the event of desecration of the earth caused by the flouting of established taboos, and other events. Various elements of the earth, like rivers, lagoons, seas, mountains, hills, trees, and wind, are assigned to the care of various deities and spirits. The Yorùbá think that, in this way, harmony is maintained among the forces of nature.

The theocentric worldview of the Yorùbá extends to the relationship between living people and deceased relatives, whom they believe influence world affairs in their capacity as invisible forces. They are, in the words of J. S. Mbiti, “living dead” who, through their spirits (*ẹ̀mí*), continue to commune with their living familiars in a temporal world. This belief rests on the African

#### VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE FORCES

The Yorùbá people believe in the Supreme Being who is called Ọ̀lórún, which means “the Owner of Heaven” or Olódùmarè. The Supreme Being is also the creator of a pantheon of other divinities and spirits, referred to as ọ̀rìṣà or *imọ̀lẹ̀*. Prominent among these divinities are Ọ̀bàtálá or Ọ̀rìṣà-Ìlá, who is considered the archdivinity because of his role in the creation of the universe. Ọ̀rúnmìlà, gifted with knowledge, is the oracle divinity and so functions in the capacity of a counselor since he has knowledge of humans’ lives

conception of time as a boundless continuum in which the past and present are united into a single phenomenon. The Yorùbá, therefore, hold that the family is composed of both living and dead members. Hence, a Yorùbá person is expected to offer food and drinks to his or her ancestors in supplication and veneration.

The practice of medicine in a traditional setting combines the use of nature with the invocation of divinities and spirits. The *onísègùn*, or medicine man, is a diviner, priest, and manufacturer of charms. The medicine man performs diagnosis and provides therapy and prophylaxis by beginning with physical examination of the patient, yet he or she introduces element of religion into ascertaining the cause of ailments (*àisàn*) and their required remedies. His or her materials that often include herbs, leaves, animals, bark, and other items, are all procured from nature but not without the performance of some rituals to invoke *Ọsanyìn* the divinity whose responsibility is to order medical care. Yorùbá medical care is a practice in which medicinal materials from nature are combined with spiritual powers that actually assure effective treatment of diseases. The witches and wizards (*ẹgbé òjé*) are believed to possess supernatural powers with which they exert influence on the physical world. The belief in the existence of witches (*òjé*) is so strong that all misfortunes, such as strange diseases, accidents, untimely deaths, and crop failures, are often attributed to the malevolent powers of the witch. In summary, the Yorùbá outlook on life is such that humans, the earth, animals, the environment, and spiritual entities relate with one another in harmony.

See also **Deities (The *òrìṣà*)**; **Divination: *Ifá***; **Sacrifice**; **Sorcery**; **Witchcraft**

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