The Orisha Concept in Yoruba Land

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Orisha is the Yoruba word for angel. The Orishas are angels of heaven sent to continually wrestle with human nature to uplift it & to purify it.

Orisha is the combination of two Yoruba words: ori & sha. Ori is the reflective spark of human consciousness embedded in essence. Sha is the ultimate potentiality of that consciousness to enter into the divine consciousness.

Ori also means the "the apex of all things, the highest of any endeavor...in the human body ori is divided into two: the physical head & the spiritual head...the spiritual head is also subdivided into two: the Ori Apari - inner (the internal spiritual ori) & the Ori Apere (the sign of an individual's personal God)."

They also believe that "the Ori Ode (physical head), the Ori Inu (the internal spirit) & the Iponri (the soul space of the inner-self) are more definitions of the Ori."
Yoruba people believe that the Orishas were created & sent by Oludumare(God) to assist in the spiritual evolution of humankind. The Yoruba concept of ancestors & Orishas as messengers of Oludumare were in effect thousands of years prior to Judeo-Christianity.

In the Yoruba religious system one must believe in the orisha in order to ascend to God-consciousness & in order to reach the divine state of human being.

There are a total of 401 Orishas in the Yoruba religion
Different Orishas in Yoruba Land

- **Osun** is the Orisha of unconditional love, receptivity & diplomacy. She is known for her sensuality, fine artistic development & beauty.

- **Oshun** is a river divinity symbolizing clarity & flowing motion. She has powers to heal with cool water & to divine based in her dream revelations & sensual perception. She has many sides. On one hand she can be short-tempered & irritable or she could be calm & fluid.
• Oshun is also considered the divinity of fertility and feminine essence. Oshun is reflected in brass, gold & shining gems. Known for her love of honey.

• Oshun is said to have gone to a drum festival one day and to have fallen in love with Shango. Since that day, Shango has been married to Oba, Oya, and Oshun, though Oshun is said to be his principal wife.
Yemoja

- Yemoja represents the divinity of all the oceans. She is said to be the mother of all Orishas & expresses her mothering throughout the earthly & heavenly realms. Yemoja is the matriarchal head of the cosmic universe.

- Yemoja is known to be very stern & expresses the protective energies of the feminine force. In Yoruba mythology, Yemoja is a mother spirit; patron spirit of women, especially pregnant women; the ocean; and the Ogun river. Her name is a contraction of the Yoruba words "Yeye omo eja" which means "Mother whose children are like fish." This represents the vastness of her motherhood, her fecundity, and her reign over all living things.
Obatala

- Obatala is the Sky Father and the creator of human bodies, which were brought to life by Olorun's breath. Obatala is the father of all Orishas and also the owner of all ori. Any Orisha may claim an individual, but until that individual is initiated into the priesthood of that Orisha, Obatala still owns that head. Obatala's wife is Yembo.

- Obatala is Olorun's second son. He is the one authorized by Olorun to create land over the water beneath the sky, and it is he who founds the first Yoruba city, Ife. Obatala is Olorun's representative on earth and the shaper of human beings.
• According to mythical stories of the Yoruba religion, Obatala is the oldest of all orisha and was granted authority to create the earth. Before he could return to heaven and report to Olodumare however, his rival Oduduwa and younger brother (in some accounts Younger Sister) usurped his position (due to Obatala's tipsy state) by taking the satchel and created in his stead the earth on the Primeval Ocean.

• A great feud ensued between the two and from there came other Divinities - Yemoja and Aganju. Historically, Obatala was a King in Ife city, he was however deposed immediately by Oduduwa and his supporters, this is re-enacted every year in the Itapa festival in Ile Ife. Ultimately, Oduduwa and his sons were able to rule with Obatala's reluctant consent.
Ogun is the divinity of iron & all that iron becomes. He is the patron of blacksmiths, hunters & warriors. Ogun represents the essence of divine justice on Earth.

Ogun is symbolized by the cauldron into which metal objects are placed. Knives are often added as Ogun is the first to taste the blood of any sacrificial animal. In Yoruba religion, Ogun is a primordial Orisha who first appeared as a hunter. He was the husband of Oya. He is said to be the first Orisha to descend to the realm of Ile Aiye, "Earth", to find suitable place for future human life.
In commemoration of this, one of his praise names is Osin Imole or the "first of the primordial Orisha to come to Earth". He is celebrated in places like Ekiti, Oyo, and Ondo States.

Ogun is believed by his followers to have wo ile sun, to have disappeared into the earth's surface instead of dying, in a place named Ire-Ekiti. Throughout his earthly life, he is thought to have fought for the people of Ire thus, he is known also as Onire.
Eshu as a divinity, is viewed as the powerful holder of the ashe or creative potency of the other Orishas. Represents the Orisha that holds the ashe & delivers messages & sacrifices.

Esu is a fundamental Orisa and of great importance in Yoruba land. There is no shrine you will get to in Yoruba land where you will not see the image or a representation of Esu. In fact, well-established towns also have their ESU at a spot, some in the entrance of the town and some in the ILEDI (i.e. the secretariat of the traditional and indigenous system of government). It is believed by the Yoruba that Esu has two hundred names. Some of them are: Lagemo Orun (the sacred child of heaven), Alaakalu (one whose greatness is manifested all over the place), Esu Odara (one who can do and undo), Ogiri oko (he who is as hard as a rock).
Esu cont’d

• Esu is primarily a special relations officer between Orun (heaven) and Aye (Earth). He is the “inspector – general” or the confidential secretary of Olodumare, which makes the final recommendation to Olodumare for the latter approval. He also reports on regular basis to Olodumare on the deeds of men and divinities, incorrectness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular.

• Esu is the right hand divinity to Orunmila; it is the duty of Esu to run errands for Orunmila and see to the perfect completion of all Orunmila desires. He (Esu) must always be in attendance and effect Orunmila’s orders. Orunmila is assigned the duty of listening to the voice of Olodumare through divination and declare his (Olodumare’s) will to the world but, wherever the formers declaration is not heeded to, it is the duty of Esu to enforce the will of Olodumare by bringing some calamity as a sort of punishment upon the recalcitrant. Esu is the approver and bearer of sacrifices to Orun (i.e. the spirit world) and is well known to the babalawos as door – opener or gate man.
• ORISA Esu can spoil things if they are not done as prescribed. As an enforcer of the will of Olodumare by the divinities and man, Esu would definitely bring bad and good things to people depending on the frequency they maintained with Olodumare’s will. This is the reason behind the misrepresentation of ESU as “devil” by those that are shallow in the knowledge of ESU earthly duties.

• Esu is a personification of good and evil, which is an acknowledgement of the presence and co - existence of positively and negatively forces in the world. ESU’s position is well explained in many of his praise song. Some of which are: Elekun n sunkun, Esu n sun eje (Esu is shedding blood when the owner of the problem is shedding tears)
Esu cont’d

• Onigbowa aye (the one in control of aye i.e. earth) Alare na ode orun (the special middle man between heaven and earth) Eni mo o ko, eni ko o, o o mo (he who knows him never meet him and he who meets him does not know him) O gba iwaju wole, onile gba ehin jade (he came through the front door and the owner of the house ran out through the back door) O lo daindain mookun oro (one who has the anointed rope to success, wealth and all the good things)

• Esu can be appeased with one or all of the followings: eku (rat), eja (fish), omi tutu (clean water), oti (gin), obi (kolanut), orogbo (bitter kola), marshed yam (eewo), ogede omini (a type of banana), eyin adie (hen egg), epo popa (palm oil), akara (bean cake), gbugburu (roasted corn), eyele (pigeon), akuko adie (cock), obuko (he – goat).

Esu is never to be fed with Adin (black extracted from palm kernel seed); it is forbidden.
• When one is to appease Esu, one first have to use his/her mouth to whistle 6 times to the left and right side of the Esu symbol i.e. 3 times on each side. One would then say APEJE 3times (meaning I have called, answer me). You will now say TI ABA PONSO IMALE AJI (while holding your left in the boxer’s form and using your right palm to beat the top of the left 3 times).

• The next thing is the praise songs of Esu, followed by the making of ones request/desire to Esu while the items are presented one after the other. Esu is known not to share anything with anyone; he takes his things wholly or fully. Lastly is the breaking of kolanut.

• Esu’s emblems or symbols are various. It can be given image of clay or wood, a piece of late rite of rock.
Esu cont’d

• The original and the aboriginal seat of ESU from creation in all of us is Ookan aya as the Yoruba call it i.e. the focal point is our chests i.e. heart. This is where the decision to do or not to do be it positive or negative is taken. The heart as part of the body is not bad, but decisions taken up there may turn out to be bad or good.

• It is a abnormal for anybody to equate ESU the divinity in the Yoruba theology to SATAN or DEVIL or LUCIFER. It is difficult and in fact impossible to find an exact equivalent of one character in a theology in another theology. However, if anybody want to describe or find an equivalent of Esu in Yoruba belief system in any other theology or God revelation, ESU is better called the holy and invisible spirit.

• Eshu as a divinity, is viewed as the powerful holder of the ashe or creative potency of the other Orishas. Represents the Orisha that holds the ashe & delivers messages & sacrifices.
• Orunmila is the Orisha of wisdom, knowledge, and divination. Orunmila is recognized as a primordial Irunmole that was present both at the beginning of Creation and then again amongst them as a priest that taught an advanced form of spiritual knowledge and ethics, during visits to earth in physical form or through his disciples.

• Orunmila is the spirit of wisdom among the Irunmole and the divinity of destiny and prophecy. He is "Ibikeji Olodumare" (second in command to Olodumare) and "eleri ipin" (witness of fate).
Ibeji is an Orisha. In Yoruba culture twins are believed to be magical, and are protected by a deity named Shango. If a twin should die, it represents bad fortune for the parents and the society to which they belong. The parents therefore commission a babalawo to carve an ibeji to represent the deceased twins, and the parents take care of the figure as if it were a real person. Other than the sex, the appearance of the ibeji is determined by the sculptor. The parents then dress and decorate the ibeji to represent their own status, using clothing made from cowrie shells, as well as beads, coins and paint.
Ibeji figures are admired by tribal art collectors and many have made their way into western collections. The world's largest collection of Ibejis is at the British Museum, London. However, the Ibeji or twins, also known as Edunjobi, is the personification of two monkeys born together.

The first born of the twins is known as Taiwo while the second one is called Kehinde. The reason for this is that the first born observes if the world is beautiful as instructed by the later before he/she descends in accordance to Yoruba belief.
• Oba is the Yoruba Goddess of the River, Daughter of Yemaja[Mother Goddess] ; She was Married to Sango [God of Thunder]. Oya and Oshun were other wives of Sango. So a little bit of rivalry existed among the three of them.

• According to Legend, Oba was the first wife and her children were set to be the heir to Sango’s kingdom. Sango however loved Oshun more than the rest of his wives because she was the best cook out of them all.

• Oba on the other hand, desperate to please Sango once asked Oshun how she succeeded in making Sango so happy all the time. Oshun was not pleased with the idea of sharing her secret with Oba, afterall Oba was the first wife and only her children stood to gain something from Sango’s kingdom.
Initially she point blank refused to tell Oba anything but after much begging and pleading, Oshun had an idea; She told Oba that the reason why Sango loved her so much was because she cut a piece of her ear, and added it to Sango’s food as part of the ingredients.

Oba was visibly pleased, she decided to out do Oshun by cutting her whole ear off instead of “a little piece”. The very next day she cut one ear off and put it in a well garnished food she had prepared, she was all smiles as she presented it to Sango encouraging him to eat as much as he could.
• Not long after Sango started eating did he notice the piece of Ear floating in the Soup; His face burned with rage as he threw the pot of soup on the floor, he accused Oba of trying to poison him and he banished her from the house.

• She cried so much, her heavy sobs began to turn into a river and the more she cried, the more she a pool of water began to form around her until she eventually turned into the River Oba which intersects with the Oṣun river at turbulent rapids, to show the rivalry between the two wives. She is still worshipped there today.
Oya

- Oya is a Great Yoruban Orisha. She is the goddess of Storms and Winds, and her realm ranges from rainbows to thunder. Her name means "She Who Tore" in Yoruba. She can manifest as winds ranging from the gentlest breeze to the raging hurricane or cyclone.

- Oya is known as a fierce Warrior goddess and a strong Protectress of women, who call upon Her. It is She who assists us with rapid inner and outer transformation. Oya, is about absolute change (especially for the good) and is not a slow or very patient energy.
Oya cont’d

• "Oya is the Queen of the Winds of change. She is feared by many people because she brings about sudden structural change in people and things. Oya does not just rearrange the furniture in the house -- she knocks the building to the ground and blows away the floor tiles." She is the Orisha of rebirth and new life. Goddesses such as she are referred to as Dark goddesses because they not only pull you into the darkness, guide you through the dark and turmoil, but they point you to the light of hope.

• Oya is the sentinel between the realm of life and death. She gives assistance and guidance to those when they make their final transition into the veils. She can either hold back the spirit of death or call it forth. Hence, she is the last breath taken.

• Oya also governs over the cemetery and the realm of the dead, and it is said that she entered into the lower world of Ira upon hearing that Shango (Her Husband) died. She is known for using charms and magic and is known as one of the Primeval Mothers of the "Elders of the Night (Witches)".
Oya cont’d

• Oya is also a Water goddess, for She is the goddess of the Niger River in Africa.

• Oya is the elder sister to the goddesses Yemaja and Oshun. She is considered the Crone aspect of this Triple goddess trilogy. As a Crone Goddess She is a teacher of truth and a bringer of justice.

• Do meditate and take in Oya's power during the wind, rain, snow and thunder storms, for She speaks to those who listen.

• She cleanses that which is sullied with Her mighty broom. Oya has nine children and Her favorite number is 9.
Olokun

- OLOKUN (oni-okun, he who owns the sea), "Lord of the Sea," is the sea-god of the Yorubas. He is one of those who came from the body of Yemaja.
- Olokun is the chief god of fishermen and of all others whose vocations take them upon the sea. When Olokun is angry he causes the sea to be rough and stirs up a raging surf upon the shore; and it is he who drowns men, upsets boats or canoes, and causes shipwrecks.
- Olokun is not the personally divine sea but an anthropomorphic conception. He is of human shape and black in colour, but with long flowing hair, and resides in a vast palace under the sea, where he is served by a number of sea-spirits, some of whom are human in shape, while others partake more or less of the nature of fish.
• On ordinary occasions animals are sacrificed to Olokun, but when the condition of the surf prevents canoes from putting to sea for many days at a time, a human victim is offered to appease him.

• A myth says that Olokun, becoming enraged with mankind on account of their neglect of him, endeavoured to destroy them by overflowing the land; and had drowned large numbers before Obatala interfered to save the remainder, and forced Olokun back to his palace, where he held him with seven iron chains till he promised to abandon his design.
Osumare

- Osumare is the Rainbow-god, the Great Snake of the Underneath, who comes up at times above the edge of the earth to drink water from the sky.

- The name is compounded of shu, to gather in dark clouds, to become gloomy, and the word mare, or maye, which occurs in one of the epithets of Olorun, and the meaning of which is uncertain.

- A variety of the python, called by the Yorubas ere, is the messenger of the rainbow-god, and is sacred to him.
Sango

• Sango is the god of thunder, and he is believed to be a great deity as he was a great man while he was alive.

• The Yoruba people share the belief that Sango is also known as Jakuta (the thrower of stones or the thrower of thunderbolt-Edun Ara).

• He is known as the center point of Lukumi (Olukumi which means my dear one) religion of the Carribeans. Many initiation ceremonies as performed in Cuba, Puerto Rico and Venezuela for hundreds of years past are based on the traditional Sango ceremony of the ancient Oyo.
Sango cont’d

• Sango has carved for himself histories among different people around the world.- Basically they are all Yoruba.

• Sango, in his lifetime, had three wives: Oba, the first wife and in the traditional sense the legitimate, Oshun, the second and Oya, the third, a concubine (as no marriage right or dowry was paid on her) was a spirit who has the power to transform from human to animal. She also has the power to summon rain. Together with Sango’s thunderbolt, they had terrific victories in battle.

• The resulting Jealousy by Oba and Oshun makes Oya to be more close to Sango- becoming his princess consort (Ayo) and having access to Sango’s thunderbolt (Edun Ara) which later bring about his doom.
Oko

- Orisha Oko is the orisha of agriculture, farming, fertility and the mysteries associated with the earth, life and death.

- He is one of the hardest working orishas for it is his job to cultivate the ground, feed humanity and the orishas, and keep the cycles of growing working year-round.

- Orisha oko gives his followers stability in life, health, vitality, fecundity and is often petitioned for work, to keep death at bay, for health issues and for assistance with conceiving a child.
Babaluaye

- Babalú-Ayé is an Orisha strongly associated with infectious disease and healing.

- The name Babalú-Ayé translates as “Father, lord of the Earth” and points to the authority. This orisha exercises on all things earthly, including the body, wealth, and physical possessions.

- In West Africa, he was strongly associated with epidemics of smallpox, leprosy, influenza, ebola, and HIV/AIDS.
• Although strongly associated with illness and disease, Babalú-Ayé is also the spirit that cures these ailments. Both feared and loved, Babalú-Ayé is sometimes referred to as the “Wrath of the supreme god” because he punishes people for their transgressions. People hold Babalú-Ayé in great respect and avoid calling his actual name, because they do not wish to invoke epidemics.

• His worship is widely associated with the Earth itself, and his shrines are often separated from commonly travelled areas. His ritual tools include a ritual broom for purification,[5] a covered terra-cotta vessel, and abundant cowry shells. Usually considered hobbled by disease, he universally takes grains as offerings.
Olorun or Eledumare is the Supreme God and Creator of the Universe. Because He is Unfathomable, He relates to mankind or other physical beings through his emissary Obatala and avatars or children of Obatala.
Ori

- Ori is each person’s personal Orisha, guardian, or spiritual self.
Osanyin is the deity of all plants, master of herbal medicine and magic.
Erinle

- The Orisha of health and medicine in general, he is a hunter as well as a healer.
**Aganju**

- Aganju is the Orisa of the Uncultivated Earth, Lord of the Volcano, Lord of Caves, The Divine Ferryman.

- Aganjú is most often referred to as the Volcano. He is also the Orisa of untamed lands, from desert to mountains, the brother/husband of Yemoja. Like Olokun, he is fabulously wealthy. As Lord of Caves he owns all the mineral wealth of the earth.

- Aganju is also the navigator, knowing the safe passages and fjords across the river.
Aganju cont’d

• Aganju is a force of life that overcomes obstacles and does the impossible. Aganyú is the symbol of all earth forces, particularly the core of the earth, the desert, and the volcano.

• He represents a brute and regenerative force that is responsible for all cataclysmic upheavals that change the face of earth. Volcanic lava is seen as his fiery breath and his power makes the earth gyrate upon its axis.

• Aganjú is depicted as the father of Shangó by some historians, and a younger brother of Shangó by others
Osoosi

- Osoosi is the deity of the accused and those seeking justice or searching for something.
- He is hunter and the scout of the orishas.
Oduduwa

• Oduduwa is considered as the first of the contemporary dynasty of kings of Ife, a deity who sent his sons and daughters out with crowns to rule over all of the other Yoruba kingdoms, which is why all royal Yoruba lineages claim ambilineal descent from its line of kings and, through it, from Oduduwa.

• A certain number of divinities were to accomplish the task of helping earth develop its crust. On one of these visits Obatala, the Great Spirit, having made palm wine from the palm trees he caused to grow after shaping the planet, began to drink. He soon became intoxicated and he was unable to accomplish the task he was originally given. Olodumare then sent Oduduwa to save what was left of the mission.

• When Oduduwa found the Obatala in a “tipsy” state, he simply took over and completed the tasks. The place which he leaped onto from the heavens and which he redeemed from the water to become land was named Ile-Ife and is now considered the sacred and spiritual heart of Yorubaland.
Recommendations

• The concept of orisha is central to the spirituality of the Yoruba. In Yoruba mythology, the orishas or deities are our connections to the spiritual realm and they serve as messengers or mediums of communication between humans and Eledumare, the supreme being.
• In other civilizations such as the Greek and Romans, their indigenous deities have been immortalized as days of the week, super heroes (e.g., THOR) and their places of worship are now world heritage sites generating vast revenues in Culture tourism.
• The Orishas of the Yoruba, their stories or myths and their non-fetish manifestations offer opportunities for harnessing creative, tourism and entertainment capital.
• They present us with a connection of our cultural and historical heritage, civilization and core values.
• They project our distinction as a people with a noble history, literary and cultural ingenuity and unique spiritual knowledge system that manifests the undisputable mathematical code of all things in the binary system of 1&0 spiritually dimensioned in the IFA knowledge system.
Thank You