

## **Myth, Ritual, and Visible Expressions of Obatala and Olokun in Ile-Ife**

**Oluwafunminiye Wasiu Raheem & Ayowole S. Elugbaju**

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

### **Abstract**

Is the 2025 published treatise entitled *Myth, Ritual, and Visible Expressions of Obatala and Olokun in Ile-Ife* (Henceforth *Visible expressions*) a critique of the dramatic or quazi-dramatic<sup>1</sup> representations of two mythic entities? The phrase ‘visible expression’ gives an instant suggestion about the book as a dramatic discourse of two mythical entities – Obatala and Olokun – than a discourse of the two mythical entities within such disciplines as history, sociology, anthropology or religious studies which constitutes the geography of the discourse that the book explores. In other words, each of the listed disciplines constitutes sources from which the theoretical, textual and methodological components of the book derive. Invariably, the interdisciplinary orientation of the book owes to the assemblage of these disciplines in a rather contiguous manner which makes for a seamless traversing of the borders of the disciplines.

### **Introduction**

One way to give an overview of *Visible Expressions* would be to highlight its significance as a latest addition to studies on the rituals of Ile-Ife – the basic point of reference for the spirituality of the Yoruba in general. By exploring a terrain earlier navigated by works such as Olupona's *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time Space and the Imagination* (2011) and Omigbule's *Rituals of Ile-Ife, Nigeria: Narratives and Performances of Archetypes* (2021) the book ignites a revalidation of the significance of these older texts. Another way is in regard to the book's focus on ritual which earns it the status of a treatise with a concern that

is in close proximity to that shared by a great deal of works on rituals in African, nay Nigeria, which engage with rituals as a form of drama.<sup>1</sup> This is in addition to the book's reinforcement of the theoretical postulation that rituals and myths are inseparable (Segal 1998: 1).

The authors seem to be puzzled as to whether myth is a mode of representing reality or not. This is a major area of concern since the symbolic communicative essence of myth is bound to be unproductively altered in the book's explanation and use of myth on invalidated grounds. The following excerpt is a case in point:

The matter is complicated by the fact that the Yorùbá creation story is regarded purely as a myth and may not be considered a fact of history. If this is the case, although the dismissal of these myths is not affected in the context in which inferences have been drawn from them to corroborate virtually all the arguments in this thesis, instances shall be drawn once again from the *Odù Ifá* corpus. This approach is strictly to give validity to the Yorùbá creation story that may otherwise be considered unsubstantiated. And of course the quantum of substance if realistic portraiture ascribed to *Ifá* is evident in the reference to *Ifá* chapters such as *Ògúndá bèdè* or *Ògúndá lètùn Ògbé lósi, Òtútúpòwan 'Ífá or Òtútúpón Òwónrín* and *Òkànràn Òwónrín* out of many that the authors see as basis for validation of mythic narratives (112)

By the standard of a recent accretion of studies on Yoruba ritual, *Visible Expressions* is an addition that must not be discountenanced if a full account of studies progressively conducted on Yoruba myths, rituals and beliefs about metaphysical entities, especially in the last one and a half decade must be rendered. More specifically, the book is one additional material that centers the ritual component of the spiritual makeup of Ile-Ife, the acclaimed origin place of the Yoruba. The book's major precursors in this regard within the timeline indicated in the foregoing are J.K. Olupona's *City of 201 Gods: In Time, Space, and the Imagination* and the 2021 publication of Morufu B. Omigbule entitled *Rituals of Ile-Ife, Nigeria: Narratives and Performances of Archetypes*. In part, the book elaborates

an aspect of Omigbule's study of Ife rituals, specifically the segment on Obatala ritual in Ile-Ife. The segment of *Visible Expressions* which discusses Olokun is however a point of major departure of *Visible Expressions* from Omigbule's study of six rituals of Ife that was published barely four years before *Visible Expressions* was published. While the 2021 published book of Omigbule does not focus on Olokun, his 2025 published article does not only make a noteworthy reference to Olokun as a Yoruba God, it explores how Olokun is appropriated to serve an ethno-nationalist end through a synergy between a self-proclaimed culture-promoting organization and a popular ethnic-nationalist group. Though the article is neither about the process or symbolism of Olokun festival nor

Olokun mythology or oral traditions associated with Olokun, the paper tangentially underscores the significance of Olokun as an important constituent of the Yoruba pantheon of deities.

*Visible Expressions* harp on the greatness of Obatala. It attempts a reconstruction of the pantheon of the Yoruba deities and foregrounds Obatala as a preeminent subject of discussion. Hence, it makes an extensive allusion to Ifa divination verses. Incidentally, the failure to demarcate between Ifa divinatory verses and myths puts the whole polemic for which the divinatory verses have been marshalled under interrogation. The collapsing of the two oral traditional forms cannot be a productive venture so long the blurring of the established line of demarcation of the two oral literary forms will encumber the process of understanding which the categorization is expected to prevent.

Somewhat, the book appeals to pity in underscoring the point that Obatala is politically supreme thereby privileging perspectives that favour Obatala's primacy in regard to politics and history. The detailing of the important rite of installation of an Ooni in which the

important place of Obatala is highlighted is to accentuate this point. One may ask why this is so; and that of what scholarly benefit is this approach to the study of entities whose social and cultural essence as well as semiotic approximations is meant to be understood as symbolic units within a structure of symbolic communicative schema? Answers to these interrogations are not obvious even if they inhere in the extensive exploration of the supernatural entities, the oral accounts on them and the explanations on beliefs and practices connected to them. The point must never be lost that the Yoruba cosmogonic myth in whatever mode it is rendered is a symbolic portraiture of the nature of social evolution and the indeterminate nature of the agency of humans.

If the foregoing constitutes a point of contestation in *Visible Expressions*, what appears like an exclusive discourse of Obatala rather than an inclusive one in which Yemoo is a visible presence is a salient other. The following excerpt from the book is evidence of the book's heavy silence on Yemoo despite its sustained discussion of Obatala on the one hand and Olokun on the other:

Drawing from the textual analysis and the pictorial evidence put forward by Stevens, the ritualistic roles played by certain individuals, including possessions, saw participation from men only. When juxtaposed with the argument of depopulation in the institution initiated by religious change among other factors, it could then, perhaps, be suggested that

the low amount of men in the activities of the institution engendered the resolution of coopting women for whom a collection of chieftaincy titles were incorporated (90)

The passing reference to Yemoo as a consort to Obatala seems insufficient. The silence – almost a total omission of her – is not in tune with the high frequency with which allusions are usually made to her particularly when performing a rite for Obatala. At such an occasion invocations of Obatala-Yemoo are jointly made. Indeed, in the Ife myth of creation featuring Obatala and Oduduwa there is usually no mention of Yemoo despite the visibility of Obatala in the myth. This nevertheless contrasts with the regular worship of Obatala in Ile-Ife during which Obatala and Yemoo are usually jointly invoked and represented with totems. In fact in such invocations, Yemoo is usually the first to be mentioned.

How valid is the idea that the festival of Obatala is ‘in throes’ as is stated in the title of Chapter IV of the book? Perhaps it should be reiterated that reconfigurations of age-old traditions occasioned by modernity are usually of both positive and negative values for the traditions and the society that hold them dearly. Ife rituals, conceived either as a cultural form or artistic form, anticipate vicissitudes in life and, so, easily adapt to change and often integrate changing circumstances within their elastic and adjustable structures and processes.<sup>1</sup> It is

in this sense the use of consumables of the contemporary times such as biscuits as ritual items must be understood as evidence of the malleability of ritual generally. In such a situation modernity should be seen as being adjusted to by ritual while modernity is at the same time being integrated within the process of ritual.

Despite what may be considered significant omissions in *Visible Expressions* the point that it is a compendium of important historical and anthropological materials must never be left out. A list of such important textual references used in reinforcing claims made by the authors and drawing useful contexts for understanding the messages the book embodies includes *In Africa's Forest and Jungle: Six Years among the Yorubans* by Richard Henry Stone; *Journal of an Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger: With a Narrative of a Voyage Down that River to Its Termination* by Richard Lander and John Lander; *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa: Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa: From the Bight of Benin to Soccatoo* by Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander; *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labors in Several Countries in the*

*Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856*  
Thomas Bowen; *The Voice of Africa: Being an Account of the Travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the Years 1910-1912* Leo Frobenius; *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* by Alfred Ellis; *Myths of Ife* by John Wyndham; and *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* by Harold Courlander; among others. No doubt, the book is an important contribution to Yoruba ritual scholarship. Like a few others in its category, it will help to increase the visibility of Yoruba ritual traditions in the wider field of Yoruba studies and African diaspora studies with particular focus on Yoruba culture and history.

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- **Morufu B. Omigbule** holds a Ph.D and he is at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria