

Velma E. Love, *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2012), 143 pp., \$52.95 (hardback)

Yoruba religion (a.k.a. Ifa/Orisha tradition) is the most widely practiced African tradition outside of continental Africa. Centuries-old branches of the faith, each with its own orientation to practice, continue to thrive in Brazil, Cuba, and other parts of the Caribbean, while new lineages have expanded in the last half-century to the United States, other areas of Latin America, and even parts of Europe. From the first arrival of Yoruba people to the Americas over five hundred years ago until present, Ifa/Orisha tradition has also remained an unbroken lineage of practice throughout Yorubaland (Southwest Nigeria) and parts of neighboring Benin.

Love situates her study in this history of Yoruba religion in the Americas before focusing on the experiences of African-American practitioners within the specific lineage of Oba Osejeman (born Walter Eugene King, 1928–2005), founder of Oyotunji Village in 1970 in South Carolina. Her textual sources are a blend of scholarly resources on and sacred texts within Yoruba tradition, and her fieldwork includes twenty-one interviews with African-American practitioners in the Oyotunji lineage from New York City and South Carolina. In her study, Love seeks to understand ways in which African-American practitioners of Yoruba religion experience meaning and transformation by internalizing stories shared during Ifa divinations.

The specificity of Love's inquiry also sets the stage for several important limitations in her study. Despite explicitly acknowledging differences and, at times, tensions between diverse branches and even specific lineages within the faith, Love goes on to devote perhaps a quarter of the text to explaining the beliefs and practices of Yoruba tradition in a way that often lacks critical attention to detail and difference. By repeating the views of one lineage of practice, often verbatim from her informants or as long quotes from Ifa religious texts, Love's presentation gives the impression that the Oyotunji lineage's orientation to practice is representative of Yoruba

tradition as a monolithic whole. Love states at the outset of her study that she is a non-initiate which would have been a non-issue for the purposes of research had she been clear throughout that she is presenting only one interpretation (among many) of Yoruba religion. With this clarity, in-depth consideration of the Oyotunji lineage of practice could have made for a useful and interesting inquiry.

Love's choice to focus on the experiences of African-Americans within the lineage of Oyotunji village is another area where specificity of inquiry could have been potentially a strength. Rather her lack of such clarity has the effect of weakening the study overall. Although Love never states outright that she aims to speak for all African-Americans within Ifa/Orisha tradition, she also fails to consider the diversity of experiences among African-American participants in Yoruba tradition. For example, some African-Americans travel extensively to Nigeria for training and follow an entirely Nigerian orientation to practice. Some practice in a distinctly Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Trinidadian, or other Caribbean lineage. Some have made pilgrimage to Brazil and practice rituals of Candomble or Umbanda. Some practice less traditional orientations to Yoruba religion such as those taught by the Ifa Foundation. Some African-Americans have an eclectic, neopagan, solitary, or intuitively guided "folk practice" and don't directly align with one lineage. These ways and the experiences of these individuals are neither better nor worse than those who practice within the lineage of Oyotunji village; however, by failing to address the fact that the majority of African-American practitioners of Yoruba religion in the 21st century do not fall directly within the lineage of Oba Osejeman and Oyotunji Village, Love implies a more singular or monolithic African-American experience of Yoruba religion than may actually be the case.

Love also never mentions that African-Americans are not the only demographic of Ifa/Orisha initiates in the United States. By failing to consider, even if briefly, the fact that non-African-Americans comprise at least a substantial minority within the overall tradition in the United States, Love deprives the reader of important context in which to situate her valuable contribution to the literature on African-American experiences of Ifa/Orisha tradition. A reader with no prior knowledge of the tradition would be at risk of forming the incorrect impression that Oyotunji Village's norms of practice apply to all practitioners and that only African-Americans practice Ifa/Orisha tradition in the United States.

For a study of modest length, Love gives considerable attention to research methodology and views this as one of the important contributions of the study. Her concern that methods honor the narrative and experiential nature of the tradition are well founded, and this aspect of the study may benefit others seeking to do interview-based inquiry within the tradition. At the same time, despite seeking to correct a historical imbalance by intentionally drawing on African-American researchers (e.g., Clyde Ford, Vincent Wimbush), Love sometimes applies these models and methods in ways that seem superimposed on the tradition. For example, her mapping of Oshun, Yemoja, and Oya as corresponding to Departure, Fulfillment, and Return (Ford) or Flight, Formation, and Reformulation (Wimbush) radically oversimplifies these orisha in a way that may not feel familiar for many practitioners intimate with these complex forces/deities.

If the reader can bear in the mind the concerns outlined above: generalization of Oyotunji Village's norms of practice onto the larger tradition, limited recognition of the diversity of African-American experiences within Ifa/Orisha tradition, and application of research methods that at times seem foreign to the tradition, Love does raise important concerns and makes several solid contributions in this study. For one, the interviews themselves are rich; when Love directly quotes or references the voices of practitioners themselves, the text comes alive and her intent to understand the transformative impact of Ifa divination in the lives of at least a select demographic of African-Americans is fulfilled. She also makes a compelling case for the interview as an appropriate research tool for Ifa/Orisha tradition and puts some key understandings in place for future interview-based research. Also, Love's presentation of the history of Oba Osejeman and Oyotunji Village and the role of the Village as an important early bridge and ongoing representative of Yoruba tradition in the United States is foundational. This historical context for researchers of contemporary Ifa/Orisha tradition in the United States remains vital, as well as being simply enjoyable reading for practitioners of Yoruba religion.

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