

YEMOJA IN BAHIA

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I am Yemoja....I am the Ancient Mother of Fishes.¹

In Yorubaland, her devotees honor the orisha Yemoja as a source of life, of fertility, of abundance. Some see her in the depths of the river Ogun near the city Abeokuta, Nigeria, where they have built her principal temple in the Iborá quarter.² Some feel her presence in the small stream near one of her Ibadan temples. Others know she comes to them from the sea when they call her to their temple in Ibadan City.³ They sing her praises in Abeokuta, Ibadan, Porto-Novo, Ketou, Adja Wèrè, and Ouidah. They know her to be powerful and her very name symbolizes this power: "Yemoja" fuses "yeye" which is "mother" with "eja" which is fish.⁴ She is the source of food and drink -- of life.

When Yorubaland extended and fragmented itself in the New World, Yemoja and her memory extended and fragmented, too. When her devotees, caught in the slave traffic and channeled through port cities on the Slave Coast of West Africa, reached ports in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and Trinidad; they maintained her cult as well as those of the other orisha. Their descendants too are faithful to her. Yet she is not in the New World what she was in the old one. She has become fragmented and fused into a greater whole. She has lost and she has gained.

The fragmentation of her name in the New World is indicative. She is "Yemaya" in Cuba. She is "Yemanjá," "Iemanjá," "Jemanja," etc. in Brazil. Deeper than the simple differences of spelling and pronunciation due to Spanish and Portuguese influences on the Yoruba is the orisha's fragmentation into many Yemoja. Lydia Cabrera speaks of the "Santos Yemaya" (Saints Yemaya) in Cuba. "Yemaya Ataramagwa," "Yemaya Achabba," "Yemaya Mallelo," and "Olokun Yemaya" all have distinct functions, roles, and personalities.⁵ Pierre Verger counts seven and possibly eight Yemoja in Bahia, Brazil.⁶ Roger Bastide agrees that there are several Yemoja in Bahia but he does not know the exact number.⁷

Bastide's explanation for the multiple orisha can hold for the parallel processes in both Bahia and Cuba. He explains this diversity in an historical and in a mythic sense. A historical accident -- the nineteenth-century slave trade -- brought diverse West African peoples to South America and the West Indies. The Bahian port Salvador received predominantly Yoruba (known in Brazil as Nagô) from Lagos. Yet other Sudanese groups (Ewes, Fanti, Ashanti, Hausa, Mandingos, Fulahs) and some groups from Bantu areas (Angola, Congo, Mozambique) were also channeled through Lagos to Bahia. Under the auspices of their masters, these African slaves grouped themselves into "nations" that roughly approximated their ethnic origin in Africa. Each "nation" kept the concept of the water deity it had known yet the Nagô influence was strong enough to impose the concept of Yemoja over all. And, conversely, the Nagô cults were also influenced by the other water-deity concepts. Thus Yemoja multiplied and diversified to include and retain in some way the various myths of the deities she had overpowered.

Will My History be Forgotten?⁸

Ellis tells the powerful story of Yemoja.⁹ In some time Odudua, who was the Earth, bore by Obatala, who was the Heavens, a son and a daughter. The son, Aganju, who was dry and barren land, married the daughter, Yemoja, who was life-giving water. They had a son, Orungan, who was the sky between heaven and earth. One sad day when Aganju was far from home, Orungan ravished his mother, Yemoja. She sprang from him and ran quickly, blindly away. He pursued her and was overtaking her and about to touch her, when she slipped and fell, striking her head against a stone.

The impact sent jets of water gushing up from her huge breasts. These streams joined to form a sweet lagoon. Her huge belly burst open and many orishas sprang from her. There were Dada, god of vegetables; Shango, god of lightning; Ogun, god of iron; Olokun, god of the sea; Oloso, goddess of lagoons; Oya, goddess of the Niger; Oṣun, goddess of the river Oṣun; Oba, goddess of the river Oba; Oko, god of agriculture; Aje Ṣaluya, god of wealth; Ṣankpanna, the smallpox god; Orun, the Sun; and Oṣu, the Moon.

The people of Yorubaland did not forget the place where Yemoja's body split open. They built the holy city Ife on that spot and "ife" means "distention," "enlargement," "swelling up."¹⁰

However, they did not remember long. Soon after Ellis recorded this legend, ethnologists found that it was known only by the people on the periphery of Yorubaland -- only on the coastal areas. And there it was known only partially, in fragments. Verger feels that this legend is almost entirely forgotten in Nigeria today¹² and has been unable to confirm it in any way in Bahia.¹³ Edison Carneiro, a Brazilian folklorist whose work has concerned Yemoja for thirty years, notes the many reservations ethnologists have felt toward this legend. He refers to Nina Rodrigues, the earliest Brazilian scholar to deal with Nagô beliefs, who found it hardly circulating among the slaves. In fact, those recently shipped from Africa had had no knowledge whatsoever of the legend while others actually denied its existence. Carneiro comments: "Não se confirmou, posteriormente, o conhecimento da lenda por parte do negro brasileiro." ("At this later date, I am less convinced of the knowledge of this legend on the part of the Brazilian Negro.")¹⁴

I Am Yemoja, Mother of the Waters and of All the Orisha¹⁵

Whether the legend of Yemoja's ravishment ever existed or whether it has passed out of the minds of the Yoruba in the Old World and the New, the concept of Yemoja as a mother is a pervasive one. Within her temples in Yorubaland and within the "terreiros" of the Nagô in Bahia, her devotees sing out her praise names. Two of them capture her power as a mother of water:¹⁶

1. Iya ọlọ ọyọn ọruba
Mother with weeping breasts
(an Oriki from Abeokuta, Nigeria)
2. Ayaba ti gbe (i)bu omi
Queen who lives in the depths of the water
(an Oriki from Abeokuta, Nigeria)

Onibu o je lomi

(an Oriki from Bahia, Brazil that Verger compares to the Oriki cited directly above)

The concept of Yemoja as a water-mother seems most poignant in the New World. The slaves, their descendants, and all those influenced by them were (and are) far from the dwelling places of the orisas in Yorubaland. All of their ceremonies in the cult houses seem like heart-rending pleas of lost children. In Bahia, Yemoja shares her maternity with four other "iyabás" (from the root word "iyá" meaning "mother"). Three of them are water orisas well known in West African tradition: Osun, Oba, and Oya (Yansan). The fourth "iyabá" is Nana (Nana Buku, Bulúku, Bruku or Buruku) who is a fascinating orisa not known in West Africa in this form and who has usurped some of Yemoja's functions.¹⁷ She has been a puzzle to the scholars if not to the Nagô and Nagô-influenced cults. The Bahians see her as a much older woman than Yemoja and sometimes feel the two orisas are first and second co-wives of Osala (Obatala).¹⁸ Sometimes it is Yemoja and sometimes it is Nana who they worship as the mother of all the orisas. Sometimes both are mothers of some of the orisas. Their relationship is a fluid and interchangeable one and again indicative of Yemoja's fragmentation in the New World.

Listen, Become My Music, Increase Like Fishes, Drink at My Sources, Dance Me¹⁹

The core of orisa worship in the New World is within the "terreiros" or temples of the Nagô in Bahia. Within the sacred space enclosed by the walls of the "terreiro," the devotees call the orisas to them and attempt to re-create in microcosm the world of the deities they had once known or dreamed of. According to Roger Bastide²⁰ the floor of the temple becomes the earth, the ceiling becomes the sky, and the orisas become the living elements of nature. The "iyabás" are the essential water elements in this cosmic mime. Oya or Yansan is tempest unfurled, Osun is the murmuring of rivers, and Yemoja is the ocean wave. They become part of the "oriša-island" created by the "candomblé" which is the name given in Bahia to the rituals and ceremonies calling the orisa to their scattered children.

The traditional "candomblé" of the Nagô and of the Gêgê-Nagô (Gêgê=Ewe) are well described in Roger Bastide's Candomblé de Bahia and Pierre Verger's Notes sur le Culte des Orisas et Voudun and Dieux D'Afrique already quoted. I am not covering the "candomblé" comprehensively but am selecting those elements of the ritual which concern Yemoja as mother, as an orisa apart from what she was in Yorubaland.

Although Yemoja may be represented in wood as a pregnant woman holding her hands against her huge belly (Verger shows parallel pictures of statues from Ibadan and Brazil), she is immaterial and only manifests herself through one or more of her devotees who become/s her medium/s during the ritual. She, in common with other orisas, reveals herself through diversity once more.

Her devotees, known as "iyawós" or "filhas de Santo," are literally her daughters. Before they may be possessed in the candomblé by Yemoja, they undergo a lengthy initiation within the terreiro as "yauos" under the supervision of the "iyalorisha" or "Mae de Santo" -- the "Mother" presiding over the candomblé. Yemoja selects her daughters through Ifá divination, by sending a dream to them, or by calling them to her during the ritual itself. Yemoja's sacred day is Saturday and, if the ritual is in her honor that day,

her iyawós decorate the large public room of the terreiro called the "barracon" with banners in her colors: light blue and crystal white and sometimes rose.

Within each candomblé (usually held weekly), no matter which orisa is being feted, every oriça has animals sacrificed to him, sacred foods placed before his "pegi" or altar, and his sacred stone or "fetish" fixed on his pegi by the Iyalorisha.

Verger says that the sacrificial offerings to Yemoja in Nigeria include a ram ("agbo"), maize corn ("egbo"), and kola ("obi").²¹ She is considerably better fed in the New World. Various sources agree that goats and sheep, chickens and ducks, pigeons, and conquém (Angola chickens) are sacrificed before her altar. Dishes of "acacá" (corn meal and rice flour mush), "acarejé" (small dumplings, made of skinless mashed beans, shrimp and onion, dropped by spoonfuls into a skillet and fried in deep "dende" oil), "abará" (banana leaves stuffed with cowpeas, shrimp, oil and hot pepper), and "ebo" ("egbo"?), which is white corn with oil, onions, and salt,²² are prepared and placed before her by her iyawós.

The marine stone is sacred to Yemoja as it is to Ogun. It seems a fitting "fetish" for these iyabá, these water-women. I was unable to find adequate information on this point but feel that it is within this stone, within its essence, that some aspect of "Axé" or magical power is incarnated.

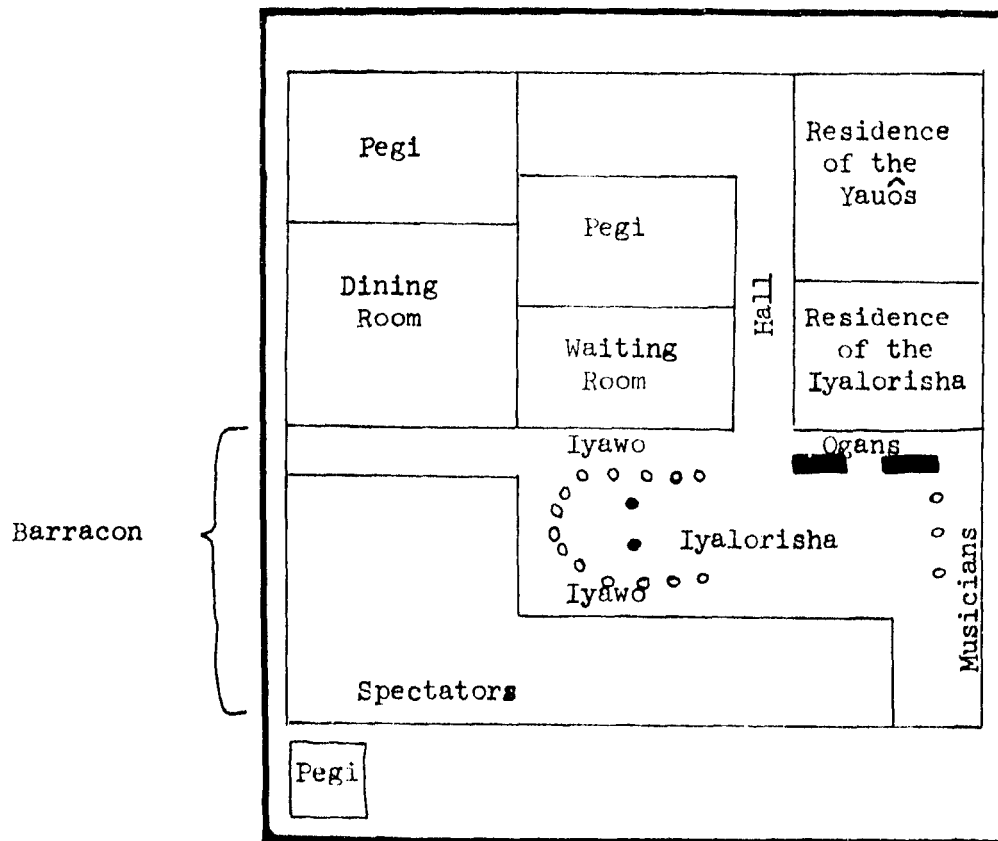


Fig. 1
Arrangement of the terreiro of a cult of Gege-Nago origin.
(After Ramos, O Negro Brasileiro.)

And within each ritual, after the "dispatching" of Esu the Trickster orisa, every orisa is called to manifest himself on the dance floor of the barracoon to make the microcosmic world complete. In this part of the candomblé, dance and music and song are indispensable. In fact, the word "candomblé" literally means "dance."

Yemoja's iyawós dance as so many waves upon the water, as the "Alagbes" or drummers beat out the drum rhythm which is Yemoja's own on three drums. The 4/4 time of the high- and low-pitched drums combine with the 3/4 time of the chants to call to Yemoja alone. Three songs are chanted to her at a time. Here is an example, collected by Melville Herskovits in a cult house in the early 1940's:²³

Ba uba-a	If we do not meet her,
Ba uba-a	If we do not meet her,
A woyo,	Though we look for her long,
Sarele	We shall hasten to humble ourselves
Yewashe	Before our mother the lawgiver.

Awade	We have arrived
Iyade lode	Our mother is outside
Ba uba	Should we not meet her?

Onibo to ile	One who nourishes and protects the house
Aya Onibo to ile	The wife of one who protects the house.
Onibo iyawa	One who nourishes, the queen,
Iya nibo ile	The mother who nourishes the household.

(Transcription and free translation by Herskovits.)

Yemoja may comply immediately and "penetrate the head (ori)" of her iyawó or she may wait for the drums to beat the "adarrum" which no orisa can resist. The iyawó who becomes her vehicle retires to the waiting room of the terreiro to dress in clothes that are Yemoja's and then returns to the barracoon to dance the dance of the orisa. As Bastide says,²⁴ it is not the iyawó who dances but Yemoja who combs her seaweed hair. She is dressed in voluminous skirts and underskirts that swish like foaming water. She has crystal beads and blue in a necklace around her neck. She is decorated with shell fish. She carries a sword sometimes and always a fan that is circular in shape, made of silver or aluminum or palm, and often has a figure of a mermaid or siren cut out of its center. This fan is "abebé" and a symbol of Oşun as well.



Fig. 2

Yemoja dancing

(After sketches by Carybe in Verger, "Yoruba Influences in Brazil," Odu.)

As the iyawó dances through the barracon the following verses are chanted.

1

Omo feseḡbe wọ Yemoja
 Iyá mi' awá jọ ni ío sun
 Omo feseḡbe wọ Yemoja

[The triple chants continue]²⁵

2

Iya ori oye, omọ gbogbo ni to olode
 Iya omi nihun
 A o bo omọ reḡ
 Iya omi nihun
 Omi rere fe
 A n seḡhe a omilḡḡḡ
 Iya omi nihun

3

B(i) o le jo le jo oni Yemoja
 J(o) akere olodo fabe sesi
 A jo fo ajo forilaḡo k o (o) mọde de
 Iya ko mọ bori dilumi oḡare

[As Yemoja dances in the barracon.]

These chants are paralleled in Yorubaland, in Ibadan, and are one more indication that the candomblé becomes a "morceau d'Afrique" thousands of miles from the ancestral home. Yemoja dances in pieces in the Nagô and Gêgê-Nagô candomblé, in the Angola candomblé and the "Macumbas" of the Brazilian cities of Rio de Janeiro and Niterói, in the "Xangoes" (ḡango) in Recife, in the "Catimbós" in northeast Brazil, and even in the "Candomblé de Caboclo" which are "mestiço" cults blending African and Brazilian Indian deities.²⁶

Yemoja splits and fragments within the blending of the Yoruba and non-Yoruba African cults in Brazil, but she found solace by joining forces with the Virgin Mary who had become many Marys in the New World, too.²⁷ Many merge Yemoja and the Virgin (in her aspect as Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception.) A Brazilian friend showed me a photograph of a statue of Yemoja from a terreiro in Bahia²⁸ and Yemoja's fair skin and Caucasian features, caught in a crystal glass and seaweed, reflected European Christianity.

Verger points out the historical necessity of this Afro-Catholic syncretism, and his explanation is so clear that I quote him here at some length:²⁹

Each Orisha was assimilated to a saint or a virgen of the Catholic religion. Originally this syncretism was merely a camouflage to disguise the cult of the Orishas, since formerly only the Catholic faith was authorized in Brazil.

On Sundays the captives were encouraged to group themselves into "nations" and to organise "Batuques" and listen to the

playing of their drums. In the eyes of the government these meetings had the advantage of maintaining the Africans' consciousness of their origins, their feelings of pride in their own "nation" and of scorn for others. Dividing them in this way made them easier to control and lessened the fear of any uprisings or revolution....

When the master passed a group where they sang of the strength and avenging power of Shango the thunder god, or of Oya, god of the storms and the Niger, or of Obatala, god of creation, and he asked the meaning of these songs, the reply was invariably "Yoyo, we are worshipping in our fashion and in our tongue, Saint Jerome, Saint Barbara or the Christ of Bomfim" (a Brazilian town). Thus under the shelter of an apparent syncretism, the old traditions have been maintained through the years. Everybody was content: the government to divide and rule and assure peace in the state, the slaves to sing and dance, the African gods to receive their praises and the masters to see such Catholic sentiments in their people.

Although it is now no longer necessary to disguise the object of gathering to worship African gods, as the constitution in Brazil has authorized the practice of all religions, the habit has remained until the present day of giving the name of a Catholic saint to the temple of an African god. With time, an evolution has taken place, and the Afro-Catholic syncretism, which was originally nothing but a mask, has become more sincere....

But Once a Year They Carry My Sacred Image in Procession and My Sacrifice
Down Footpaths to the River³⁰

On February 2, the feast of Candlemas of the Purification of Our Lady, or on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, Bahians carry Yemoja and Mary or Yemoja/Mary to the shores of lakes and banks of rivers. One of the most famous of these "festas" winds along the sea and the banks of the Rio Vermelho to the shores of a little lake called Dique where many feel Yemoja may be. On New Year's Eve, urban Brazilians -- from the urban slums of Rio de Janeiro, the "favelas," from aristocratic homes around Copacabana Beach -- come to the sea to honor Yemoja.³¹

Yemoja becomes more than an orisa, more than a Virgin in African folk-Catholicism. She pulls to herself all the deities of water. Carneiro says that she has overpowered the Angolan water genie Kianda or Kituta,³² while Nina Rodrigues claims that she is a European mermaid, a siren, a Lorelei, Venus born again in a seashell floating on the waves.³³ Carneiro asserts again that she absorbs the indigenous Brazilian concept of "Mãe d'agua" (Mother of water).³⁴

And it is true that in these yearly processions, Yemoja is not what she was. She is still a mother but a coy and capricious one. She is still a mother but her interests have turned inward.

Her devotees bring her gifts in huge baskets: soaps and perfumes, fresh or artificial flowers, lace handkerchiefs, pieces of silk, necklaces and bracelets, and silver. They bring her face powder and fans. They bring her pre-

sents that a beautiful woman, whether a mother or not, would need for her toilet.

They fill the baskets with letters of supplication, asking her aid in love affairs and on journeys. They see her now as a patroness of lovers and of travelers.

They pile these overflowing baskets on little boats called "saveiros" which carry these offerings out from the shore or bank. If the saveiros sink, then all know Yemoja is well-pleased. No one knows what the outcome will be and all fear her displeasure.

In these yearly processions, she is called "morena," a term for a white person with brown or black hair. Statues show her skin to be dark and her hair long and soft. Thus Yemoja, in her fusion of African, European, and especially Brazilian Indian traits, draws all Brazilians together in a national cult³⁵ and she can truly say:

I am Yemoja, Mother of All Currents of Feeling that Draw Hands Together³⁶

NOTES

1. Judith Gleason, Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland (New York, 1971), pp. 6-7.
2. Pierre Verger, Dieux D'Afrique (Paris, 1954), p. 186.
3. G. J. Afolabi Ojo, Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis (London, 1966), p. 165.
4. A. B. Ellis, The Yoruba-speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa (London, 1894), pp. 43-46.
5. As quoted by Pierre Verger in Notes sur le Culte des Orisa et Voudun à Bahia, la Baie de Tous les Saints, au Brésil et à l'Ancienne Côte des Esclaves en Afrique (Dakar, 1957), p. 294.
6. Ibid., p. 293.
7. Roger Bastide, Le Candomblé de Bahia (Rite Nagô) (Paris, 1958), p. 146.
8. Gleason, Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland, p. 8.
9. Ellis, The Yoruba-speaking Peoples, pp. 43-46.
10. Ibid.
11. Verger, Notes sur le Culte des Orisa et Voudun, p. 292.
12. Ibid.
13. Verger, Dieux D'Afrique, p. 186.
14. Edison Carneiro, "A Divindade Brasileira das Águas," Revisita Brasileira de Folclore 8, no. 21 (1968), 145.

15. Gleason, Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland, p. 6.
16. Verger, Notes sur le Culte des Orisa et Voudun, passim.
17. Carneiro, "A Divindade Brasileira das Águas," p. 145.
18. Ruth Landes, "Fetish Worship in Brazil," JAF 53 (1940), 264.
19. Gleason, Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland, p. 10.
20. Bastide, Candomblé de Bahia, pp. 72-73.
21. Verger, Notes sur le Culte des Orisa et Voudun, p. 291.
22. Jonathan Norton Leonard, Latin American Cooking (New York, 1968), pp. 123-131.
23. Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, eds. "Afro-Bahian Religious Songs (Songs of African Cult Groups)," Folk Music of Brazil (Library of Congress -- Music Division, Washington, D.C.), Album 13, item 746.4.
24. Bastide, Candomblé de Bahia, p. 22.
25. Verger, Notes sur le Culte des Orisas et Voudun, pp. 302-303.
26. Edison Carneiro, "The Structure of African Cults in Bahia," JAF 53 (1940), 275-276.
27. Manuel Diégues Júnior, "O Culto de Nossa Senhora na Tradição Popula," Revisita Brasileira de Folclore 8, no. 20 (1968), pp. 23-24.
28. Oneyda Alvarenza, Catalogo Ilustrado do Museu Folclorico (São Paulo, 1950), photo no. 114.
29. Pierre Verger, "Yoruba Influence in Brazil," Odu, no. 1 (1955), pp. 5-7.
30. Gleason, Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland, p. 8.
31. Carneiro, "A Divindade Brasileira das Águas," p. 143.
32. Ibid., p. 146.
33. As quoted in Verger, Notes sur le Culte des Orisa et Voudun, p. 293.
34. Carneiro, "A Divindade Brasileira da Águas," p. 153.
35. Ibid., p. 149.
36. Gleason, Orisha: The Gods of Yorubaland, p. 10.