

---

## **The Concept of ELA in Yoruba Belief and Biblical Christology**

**John Olu Adetoyese**

---

### **Introduction**

This research work is a comparative study of Ela in the Yoruba indigenous religions and Jesus of the Christian circle. It attempts to underscore the similarities between these two religious figures, as well as pinpoint their differences. It is hoped that this study will go a long way to help readers to discover how Ela, otherwise known as Orunmila, is portrayed in a way akin to the biblical portrait of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Name “Orunmila”, Orunmila, pronounced Ọrunmila, is generally accepted as a derivative of sort, also known as Ela or Ela soode (Ela ties Ide on). One angle suggests that the ancient scholars interpreted as based on the verb "la" explaining the meaning as "Ọlòrún-mọ-Ẹ̀la" (God knows Ẹ̀la). Another suggests that the name is derived from the phrase "Orun-ni-o mo eni-ma-la" (only heaven can identify the saved).

### **The Ministry of Ela**

Ela is the prophet that developed and spread the Ifa divination system. Orunmila is second only to Olodumare/Olorun (God, or Supreme Being), and is without earthly lineage. He embodies the principles of Ifa.<sup>87</sup> Among West Africans, 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

---

<sup>87</sup>“Orunmila,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orunmila> [accessed September 30, 2013].

ethics, during visits to earth in physical form or through his disciples.

Ifa is said to be Olodumare's message to man which was brought to earth by Orunmila who is Ibikeji Olodumare (Vicegerent<sup>88</sup> of the Omnipotent), and according to Bascom,<sup>89</sup> the oracle based on 16 basic and 256 derivative configurations of Odu which are obtained either by the use of sixteen Ikin (palm-nuts) or the *Ọpẹlẹ* (chain) of eight half-seed shells. The custodians of Yoruba tradition assert that Orunmila gave the Odu Ifa to man after a particular incident when one of His disciples insulted Him. After the act of disrespect He returned to heaven in indignation. Confusion prevailed on earth humbling the people who sent His disciples to plead with Him. When they found Him and asked for His mercy He did not come back to earth but gave them 16 palm nuts to use as the oracle in consulting Him for any good thing on earth. This is when Orunmila, who the Ifa devotees have known as the Word of God and *Oyigiyigi ota omi* (Everlasting Rock), set down the Odu Ifa for man's use. He is said to be Ela's first incarnation on earth and has been known to the Yoruba as the Saviour and Redeemer long before the European invasion of Africa.

In Yoruba mythology, Ela 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 "eləriipin" (witness of fate). Orunmila is also referred to as Agbonniregun, the embodiment of knowledge and wisdom of Ifá. In the Santeria/Lukumi Diaspora in present-day Cuba, Orunmila is known as Orula & Orunla which are not as commonly used in Africa. Orunmila is also known as Ifá and is referred to by that name in a number of Ifá verses, though some claim Ifá only refers to the method of divination. It was also Orunmila who

---

<sup>88</sup> A vicegerent is a deputy appointed to act on the authority of a ruler or magistrate, especially in administrative duties ["Vicegerent", (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008).

<sup>89</sup>William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*(Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 24.

carried Ifá (the wisdom of Olodumare) to Earth. Priests of Ifá are called babalawo (elder of the confraternity) or Iyanifa (female Ifá priest).

Orunmila is considered a sage, recognizing that Olodumare placed Ori (intuitive knowledge) as prime Orisha. It is Ori who can intercede and affect the reality of a person much closer than any Orisa. For this reason it is important to consult with the Babalawo to understand one's direction and the wish of one's Ori.

### **The Deputising Roles of Ela**

There are three questions concerning the deputizing roles of Ọ̀bàtálá and Ọ̀rúnmilà:

1. Why is Ọ̀bàtálá the Son of Ọ̀ṣorun but not the Son of Olódùmarè or Son of Eledua?
2. Why is Ọ̀bàtálá the Ẹ̀ni Ọ̀tun Eledua but not the Ẹ̀ni Ọ̀tun Ọ̀ṣorun or Ẹ̀ni Ọ̀tun Olódùmarè?
3. Why is Ọ̀rúnmilà the Ibikeji Olódùmarè but not the Ibikeji Ọ̀ṣorun or Ibikeji Eledua?

According to Yoruba tradition, three of the many appellations by which the Supreme Being is known are Ọ̀ṣorun, Olódùmarè and Eledua. Many times the three are used interchangeably, especially Ọ̀ṣorun and Olódùmarè, but this perhaps ought not to be as a close perusal of Ifa literature reveals that each implies different attributes and relationships depending on context. An obvious example is seen in the three questions above which are about the relationship between the Supreme Being on one hand and Ọ̀bàtálá and Ọ̀rúnmilà on the other.

The description of Ọ̀bàtálá as the Son of Ọ̀ṣorun implies that he deputizes for the Supreme Being. For him to do so he would have to be seated at the right hand side of the Supreme Being, the confirmation of which is seen in the appellation Ẹ̀ni Ọ̀tun Eledua meaning “One at the right side of Eledua” – “Ẹ̀ni” means

“One” (pronoun) while “Ọtun” means “right.” In the palace hierarchy of the Yoruba people, the deputy to the Ọba (Ruler) bears the title Ọtun.

Ọrúnmilà’s appellation of Ibikeji Olódùmarè is no different, sort of. It is translated as “Deputy/Vicegerent/Second to Olódùmarè” and is supported by another appellation which is Èlẹri Ipin or “Witness of fate/destiny.” He has the latter appellation because he is present when each eniyan (person) comes before Olódùmarè to declare his/her chosen destiny the Supreme Being. In order for Ọrúnmilà to be present he would most likely have to be seated to the right of the Supreme Being to witness the event. This enables him to have the information necessary to fulfil his role as Oduduti n du oriemere or “He who rectifies the unlucky destinies,” and A tun ori ti kosunwọn se, or “He who repairs ill luck.”

Edu is another appellation of Ọrúnmilà and it means “Blackness” or “The Black One”, because of his quite black complexion. According to Oyinbo Egyptologists, it is one of the appellations known to the true people of ancient Ejigbo (re-lexified by those Egyptologists to Egypt) as belonging to Ọrìṣà (re-lexified by same to Horus) who is Ọbàtálá. These would seem to suggest an equivalent and unified relationship between Ọbàtálá and Ọrúnmilà, especially with regard to the Supreme Being.

But Adeoye relates the story behind Obatala being the second-in-command to Eledaa before he was eventually succeeded by Orunmila, not when he died but as time went on. When the deities were sent to create the earth and they were all mandated to make sacrifices to Olodumare before going, it was only Orunmila who obeyed the command to sacrifice. Not only that, on the journey Orunmila assisted Obatala in carrying his load and this sense of humility coupled with the aforementioned

obedience to Olodumare engineered the promotion of Orunmila to becoming next to Olodumare.<sup>90</sup>

### **Titles of Ela**

Orunmila's eulogies go thus:

<b>Yoruba</b>	<b>English</b>
Eleri-Ipin	Witness to man's choice of Ori (destiny) at the beginning of the individual's existence
IbikejiOlodumare	Vicegerent of the Father
Aje-ju-Oogun	One whose power surpasses magic/sorcery by far
Oluwa mi a-to-bajaye	Our Master/Head, savior most powerful
Ọrọ a-bikujigbo	Mysterious power that challenged and defeated death
Ogege a-gbaye-gun	To You salutation is due first thing each morning
Odudu tin du oriemere	You are the Equilibrium that adjusts evil in favour of good
A-tun-ori-ti-kosunwon-se	Compassionate Master that changes man's fortune from bad to good
A-mo-iku	To know you is to become immortal
Ọlọwa-ayere	Master whose Kingdom has no end
Agiri-ile-il'ogbọn	Perfection of wisdom Oluwa mi a-mo-ti-mo-tan Infinity of knowledge
A komọ ọ tan, koşe	Our imperfect devotion to / knowledge of You leads to futility
Aba mọ ọ tan, iba se	Our perfect knowledge of You leads to success/bliss/prosperity
Oyigiyigi Ota-inu-omi	Everlasting Rock or Rock of Ages that lays on the river-bed unperturbed, eternal, never wearing away.

**1. Eleri-Ipin:** Yoruba tradition has it that before a man is born on earth he goes to a certain place to pick his Ori (destiny/fate/life experiences) and presents himself with his choice to the Father. Thereafter he is sent to earth to be born and make the most of his choice. When his days are up he has to give account to the Father about his use

<sup>90</sup> C. L. Adeoye, *Asaatilse YORUBA* (Ibadan: University Press, 2010), 9ff.

of that choice of Ori. Orunmila is believed to be present when man makes this choice.

**2, Ibikeji Olodumare:** As vicegerent of the Father, Orunmila is perfectly positioned to witness the presentation by man of his choice of destiny and can thus give each person his due reward. The researchers' understanding of this position is that as the divine first-born. He is seated at the Father's right hand (Psalm 110:1; Matthew 22:41-46) from where He sees what the Father does (John 5:19-20) and from where He learns from the Father concerning His Inheritance.

**3. A-tun-ori-ti-ko-sunwọn-se:** By virtue of Orunmila's position as just discussed He is able to help man in achieving his destiny and steering him a right.

Various other titles as gleaned from some Odu verses are associated with Orunmila, and they are:

<b>Yoruba</b>	<b>English</b>
Apojo-Iku-da	He who the span of human life in His hands
Baba Ajakurukurubete	Little Mighty Father
LaakuOgege	The Immortal One that climbed the Ege tree
BansoElewuubanjini to fi gboboaral'ojuka?	Banso, who is blessed with the all-seeing eye
Alaikuomọ-a-ye-l'ohun-kere	He who is blessed with eternal life and abiding health
EleşinOyan	Royal Knight of the City of Oyan
Adagbaojomu	First citizen of Ojomu
Okinkinti i jeeyin Erin o fon?	Master whose name is the sound of the elephant's trumpet
Edu	Black One <sup>91</sup>
Erigi	Mighty Master
Emi ti d Araba, motiditi, Apaarayewọn o tunkatemi	I am the infinite circumference of the Baobab tree that no man's arms can embrace.

<sup>91</sup> His symbol is said to be the *ikin* which are black in colour.

## **A Comparative Study of Ela and Jesus Christ**

It is a fact that Yoruba indigenous worshippers believe in a number of divinities. There is however also a strong belief in the Supreme Being called *Olodumare* (the Most High God) or *Olorun* (the Owner of Heaven). The much number of divinities and spirits present in Yoruba pantheon are believed to be intermediaries between the remote Supreme Being and the world of man.<sup>92</sup> These divinities, roughly estimated at 1,700<sup>93</sup> are in the indigenous belief of the Yoruba “ministers of *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being)” as they serve His will in the creation and theocratic government of the world.

In this Yoruba pantheon of gods is included a divinity of special significance called “Ela”. The story of Ela in Yoruba oral traditions, myths, songs and proverbs bear much resemblance to the life and mission of Jesus Christ recorded in the Christian scripture. Thus, this section is a contrast of the Yorubas’ Ela and biblical Jesus and this will be done both in terms of their names and their functions as can be garnered from the various historical records available to the writers.

### **Names and Titles**

Etymologically, the name Ela appears to have originated from the Hebrew word for God, “Elohim”. The Yoruba affix “la” is a verb which means “to save.” Hence, the name Ela in Yoruba indigenous religion carries the alternative meanings of “God saves”, “Salvation comes from God, “God, our Saviour”, and so on. While this etymological breakdown of the name “Ela” may be conjectural, the different renditions above are significantly

---

<sup>92</sup>E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1962), 1-3; cf. also Cornelius A. Olowola, *African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1993), 30.

<sup>93</sup>Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 2.

replica of the Hebrew and Greek texts.<sup>94</sup> The OT Hebrew word “Yoshua” (English, Joshua), translated “Iesous” (Jesus) in the Greek NT, carries the alternative meanings of “Salvation is of the Lord” and “the Lord saves.”<sup>95</sup>

Another name for Ela commonly used by the people of Ile-Ife (the cradle of Yoruba race) is “Oluorogbo”. This name has been often confused by some with that of an Ife lesser divinity, popularly believed to be the only son of the ancestress goddess Moremi, whom she offered as a votive sacrifice to the river goddess Esinmirin for helping her on her saving enterprise to the Igbo kingdom.<sup>96</sup> But as argued by Oyelade, the name “Oluorogbo” given to Moremi’s son was just a theosophic name in honour and continuous remembrance of the great significance of an older divinity by the same name in Yoruba pantheon.<sup>97</sup>

There are various etymological breakdown of the name “Oluorogbo” by scholars. For instance, Jegede<sup>98</sup> rendered it as “Lord of all” (“Olu” meaning ‘Lord,’ and “Orogbo” interpreted as “superior to all”). Oyelade<sup>99</sup> interpreted as “the Lord who made the earth strong”, as an inference from a Yoruba oral tradition, *Asedaaiye, to nikiaiyekogbo, kosi to* (meaning, the Creator of the Universe, who said the world should be strong and be peaceful).

---

<sup>94</sup>Samson AdetunjiFatokun, *Soteriology: An African Outlook (A Historical Study of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation from African Perspective* (Ibadan: End-Time Publishing House Ltd., 2010), 144.

<sup>95</sup>Cf. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, W. Gesenius, eds., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicons* (Indiana: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1978), 447.

<sup>96</sup>Cf. J. O. Awolalu, *Yoruba Sacrificial Rites and Rituals* (Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1979) for details.

<sup>97</sup>E. O. Oyelade, *Interview* (A Retired Professor of Religion, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, February 14, 2005).

<sup>98</sup>C. O. Jegede, *Interview* (Doctor of Traditional Medicine and Lecturer in African Traditional Religion, University of Ibadan, February 24, 2005).

<sup>99</sup>Oyelade, *Interview* (February 14, 2005).

Olateju<sup>100</sup> made a linguistic projection from a morphological point of view. According to him, *Olu* carries the meanings “Lord, Master, Chief” while *o-rogbo* means “to be strong, or mighty.” Hence, for Olateju “Olu-rogbo” as an alternative name for Ela among the Ife of Western Nigeria means “the Lord who is strong and mighty.”

Furthermore, drawing inference from the son of Moremi who was given the same name, Olateju submitted that Oluorogbo could also carry the connotation of “chief son” or “chief child” and it has been noted that Ela is called *Olu-Omo*<sup>101</sup> (the Beloved child). At any rate, the name Oluorogbo, etymologically considered, suggests some parallels with some Christological names and titles of Jesus in the Gospel narratives and other passages of the Bible.

Ela’s other titles, as considered earlier, share some affinity with the titles given to Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. Ela as a witness to man’s choice of destiny at the beginning of the individual’s existence is comparable to Jesus being a witness as ruler of God’s creation (2 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 1:5; 3:14). The status of Ela as a vicegerent of the Supreme Being is not different from the biblical portrait of Jesus as God’s vicegerent. Among the Ijebu of southwest Nigeria, Ela is called *Omo-Oshin*, meaning “the Son of the Ruler of rulers or King of Kings, i.e. Olodumare; and the biblical records also present Jesus in the same manner (e.g. Lk. 1:35).

Both Ela and Jesus are seen as: One whose power surpasses magic/sorcery by far; Master/Head (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 6:23); savior (Matt. 1:21); most powerful (Col. 2:15); mysterious power that challenged and defeated death (Eph. 4:8-10); Compassionate Master that changes man’s fortune from bad to

---

<sup>100</sup>M. O. A. Olateju, *Interview* (Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistic and African Languages, University of Ibadan, February 24, 2005).

<sup>101</sup>Fatokun, *Soteriology: An African Outlook (A Historical Study of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation from African Perspective)*, 154.

good (Jesus' Gospel including His works and miracles); One through whom immortality comes by knowing Him (cf. John 3:16-18); Master whose Kingdom has no end (Rev. 5:13-14); Perfection of wisdom (Col. 2:3; cf. Eph. 1:8); etc.

### **Creative Power**

As stressed by Abogunrin, the concept of the *Logos* (that is, Jesus as the Word of God, the Creative Word) is a universal phenomenon present in one form or the other in virtually all the religions of the world.<sup>102</sup> "In a similar way, the paradox of the "tragedy and comedy" of the death and the glorious resurrection of God's Beloved Son which led to the reordering of the disordered world of man is a story readily at home, though in a shrouded form, in Yoruba indigenous religion."<sup>103</sup>

Furthermore, according to Oyelade,<sup>104</sup> "Ela" in Yoruba indigenous religion is "Oro" (that is, Word). This word in Yoruba cosmogony is the "Creative Word". Thus, as stressed by him, the name "Ela" has the alternative rendering of "the Being who made things to exist." This position is buttressed by Idowu, who wrote: While according to our oral tradition, it was Orunmila who came down with Orisa-nla to arrange earth's trappings, we have also the explicit statement that it was "Ela" who organized the earth's affairs and set things in their proper places. He is even described as the one who made all things, in the sense that it was through his agency that all things have their being.<sup>105</sup>

The same thing was said of Jesus in the Gospel according to John in the first chapter. The prologue to the Book reads thus:

---

<sup>102</sup>S. O. Abogunrin, "The Cosmic Significance of Jesus Christ in the African Context" in *ORITA – Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (June 1998), 3-4

<sup>103</sup>Fatokun, *Soteriology: An African Outlook (A Historical Study of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation from African Perspective)*, 143.

<sup>104</sup>Oyelade, *Interview* (February 14, 2005).

<sup>105</sup>Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 103.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (Jn. 1: 1-3 NIV). Jesus, just like Ela, is the creative Word employed by the Supreme Being in the creation of the cosmos.

### **Conception**

Anyone might consider the above etymological breakdown of names and titles as mere conjectures, but the story of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Ela among the Yoruba indigenous worshippers, to a large extent, runs parallel to the gospel narratives of the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ. “Unlike other divinities in Yoruba pantheon, Ela is believed to be the only primordial divinity that was not created but born. While Ela is generally believed to have been generated by Olodumare in timeless eternity, a tradition holds that Ela at a time made his appearance in human history: born by a mother but without a father in human term. This explains the reason why in Yoruba oral tradition Ela is called *Omo bibi Olodumare* (that is, the Begotten Son of the Supreme God). This concept of “virgin birth” is seen in the historical records concerning Jesus (Matt. 1:23) and it is a pivotal doctrine in Christianity.

In the same vein, the mother of Ela is called “Oyigi” who is honoured in Yoruba pantheon as the Queen of heaven in a way similar way to the Roman Catholic view and veneration of the Virgin Mary as *The otokos* – bearer of God.<sup>106</sup> Oyigi, according to Olaoye, is a woman of outstanding character and good conduct, very popular and held in high esteem even by all divinities in heaven.<sup>107</sup> This picture bears much resemblance to

---

<sup>106</sup>Fatokun, *Soteriology: An African Outlook (A Historical Study of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation from African Perspective)*, 147-8.

<sup>107</sup>Adeoye, *Igbagbo ati Esin Yoruba*, 237.

what was said of Mary in the Annunciation account in Luke 1: 26-38.

## **Divinity**

Ela is still believed by the indigenous Yoruba worshippers to have his existence in antiquity in heaven. In fact he is called the “Prime Minister of Olodumare,” and a very powerful member of the decision-making body of heaven.<sup>108</sup>Ela is also called Ifa, the Yoruba oracle of divination, or simply put, the “god of wisdom and counsel.”<sup>109</sup>In the Yoruba religion, Orunmila is the Orisha of wisdom, knowledge and divination worshiped principally in West Africa, Cuba, Brazil and the United States. Jesus is also described as the One who gives wisdom (Eph. 1:8), the One who embodies wisdom (Col. 2:3), as well as the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24; Prov. 8).

In an Ifa corpus, *Edi Iwori*, Ela is called “the spirit of truth, righteousness, and amicable living.”<sup>110</sup> In the same Ifa corpus, he is pictured as “the Light of the world.”<sup>111</sup> These characteristics are attributed to Jesus of Nazareth as well in the Christian NT scriptures. For example, Jesus refers to Himself as the truth (Jn. 14:6) and as the light of the world (Jn. 9:5). The apostles of the early church described church in terms that are analogous to the last descriptions of Ela.

Ela has been described as Ifa’s most sacred inner life, Ifa’s most sacred inner life, Ifa’s inherent fate: vulnerable and yet ready to hit ferociously the high-and-fast flying target in the unimaginable complex, intertwined swarm of possible constellations of destiny and of the fatal shears... In a very similar way to the prophecy of Isaiah about the coming of Jesus

---

<sup>108</sup>Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 103.

<sup>109</sup>Cf. WandeAbimbola, *Ifa (An Exposition of Ifa Corpus)* (Ibadan: O. U. P. Nigeria, 1973), 3.

<sup>110</sup>Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 103.

<sup>111</sup>Fatokun, *Soteriology: An African Outlook (A Historical Study of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation from African Perspective)*, 154.

into the world (Isa. 9:6; cf. also Rev. 12:5), Ela is pictured in Ifa corpus as “the adolescent child-man, Ifa.”<sup>112</sup> As related by Ade Ajayi, Ela as Ifa occupies a significant position as the unifying substructure of all Yoruba deities, and his corpus of divination chants is the summation of Yoruba beliefs.<sup>113</sup> That is to say, all the devotees of the different Yoruba deities meet in Ela as “the veiled mental feeling and core of Ifa divination.”<sup>114</sup>

## Works

As revealed in Ifa corpus and Yoruba oral traditions, Ela is also referred to as *Alaatunse ati Olugbalaaiye* (meaning, the Saviour and Repairer of the world). Oral traditions have it that the divinely well-ordered world of man was at a time turned upside down by Esu, and after futile attempts by the divinities Edan and Orunmila to reorder the disordered world, Olodumare (the Supreme Being) at last decided to send Ela, the Beloved Son, down to the earth to do the work of restoration. For this reason, Ela is commonly called among the Yoruba: “At’aye se” and “Alatunse-aiye” (both meaning the Repairer of the world).<sup>115</sup> This position is buttressed by a portion of *Edi Iwori*,<sup>116</sup> in Ifa corpus which calls him *Iko Ajalaiye Iko Aja-Olorun* (meaning “the Chief Messenger-Link between earth and heaven”) and says:

---

<sup>112</sup>Susanne Wenger and Gert Chesi, *A Life with the Gods in their Yoruba Homeland* (Worgi: Perlinger, 1983), 81, 149.

<sup>113</sup>J. F. Ade Ajayi, “Promoting Religious Tolerance and Cooperation in the West African Religion: The Example of Religious Pluralism and Tolerance among the Yoruba,” *The Guardian* (April 25, 2004).

<sup>114</sup>Wenger and Chesi, *A Life with the Gods in their Yoruba Homeland*, 81.

<sup>115</sup>Adeoye, *IgbagboatiEsin Yoruba*, 237.

<sup>116</sup>Cf. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 104 quoting E. A. Kenyo, *Isedale Yoruba (Yoruba Origins)* (Lagos, 1953), 26. Interestingly enough, a picture of the sculpture of Ela taken at Osogbo in Osun State of Nigeria where he stands as a very tall man with both hands raised up connecting the earth to the heaven is reproduced in Wenger and Chesi, *A Life with the Gods in their Yoruba Homeland*.

<b>Yoruba</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>ElaIworinikijekiaiyeraju...</i>	ElaIwori is he who who saves from world ruins...
<i>NigbatiElegbarabafes'oriaiyekodo,</i>	Whenever Elegbara plans to turn the world upside down
<i>ElaIwori, ni ma dubuona re...</i>	Ela is the one who obstructs him...

The foregoing description of Ela is, of a truth, parallel to the biblical conception of Jesus. Jesus is said to have been the One who saved the world from ruins, and who appeared to destroy the works of the devil.

### **Death and Resurrection**

In addition, Yoruba traditions believe Ela to be the “conqueror of evil forces and death” in his outstanding victory over Esu in a long-drawn and fight-to-finish battle subsequent to Ela’s bid to repair the earth spoilt by Esu. Historically, the scene of this battle, according to Ifa corpus is called “Okerekesese”, a Yoruba traditional general term for the Middle East. Similarly, Jesus also died in Jerusalem, a city in the nation of Israel, which is also in the Middle East.

The fight between Ela and Esu lasted seven days and from the episodes of this historic fight which lasted for seven days were derived the Yoruba names for the days of the week. The seven days correspond to the Passion Week in the Gospel narratives. The story of the salvific mission of Ela is of so much significance to the traditional Yoruba society that, among the 1,700 divinities worshipped, only Ela was honoured with the names of the week. And interesting enough, the naming system predated the coming of the Christian missionaries,<sup>117</sup> and the days share some features with the Passion Week in the Gospel narratives.

---

<sup>117</sup>Cf. Adeoye, *IgbagboatiEsin Yoruba*, 239-40 for details about the episodes of the seven-day fight and the subsequent naming of days after them.

For instance, the fifth working day of the week is called *Ojo Eti* (the Boring Day) as a result of the prolonged battle recorded on that day between Esu and Ela, unlike the days earlier, and it ended up in the killing of Ela by Esu. This is not much different from the Christian Good Friday, when it is believed that Jesus was killed by crucifixion. The day after that, Saturday, is in Yoruba indigenous naming system called *Ojo Abameta* (the Day of Three Resolutions) – based on the three resolutions arrived at on that day against Ela by the supporters of Esu to prevent Ela’s earlier proclamation that he would gain victory over death and through that gain immortality.<sup>118</sup> The last day of the fight, Sunday, is called *Ojo Aiku* (the Day of Immortality) – a day highly significant for the traditional Yoruba society as the day when Ela dealt a devastating blow on Esu by triumphantly rising from death and climbed up back to heaven by a chain let down by Olodumare for that purpose. The Sunday described here is comparable to the celebrated Easter Sunday when Jesus purportedly resurrected.

### **Divination System**

Ela created the Ifa system of divination so that his followers might inquire from him whatever they needed to know. That is, Ifa is the medium of communication between the worshippers of Ela and Ela himself. This cannot but be understood similar to the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus to His disciples. The Holy Spirit, to some extent not different from Ifa, is the Comforter and Counsellor who will teach the disciples *all things* and remind them of *everything* Jesus had said to them (Jn. 14:26). Also, He will take from what is Christ’s and make it known to the disciples. In short, both Ifa and the Holy Spirit disclosers of

---

<sup>118</sup>Adeoye, *Igbagboati Esin Yoruba*, 239-40: The three resolutions are as follows: (i) To keep vigilance and do everything possible to ensure that Ela did not resurrect or gain immortality; (ii) That if he eventually resurrect, that they would do everything possible to prevent him from coming out to the public; and (iii) To ensure that he did not succeed in ascending back to heaven to meet Olodumare, peradventure he prevailed and came out to the public.

divine knowledge. In terms of worship, the cult of Ela has no image for worship just as Christians do not have an image for Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

This work, so far, has revealed that Ela in Yoruba indigenous religion and Jesus of the NT have some common attributes. But it must be said that unlike Jesus, Ela is not conceived as a sacrificial victim for the redemption from slavery to sin but rather as Olodumare's special emissary solely entrusted with the responsibility of restoring the world set upside down by Esu. The death of Ela is not seen as atonement for sin which makes him different from the biblical portrait of Jesus Christ. Liberation from sin and eternal condemnation are not present in the salvific work of Ela and this makes him dissimilar to Christ. Therefore, the writers of this work conclude that, notwithstanding the resemblances, Ela is not the same as Jesus Christ of the Christian religion.

## Sources

- Abimbola, Wande. *Ifa (An Exposition of Ifa Corpus)*. Ibadan: O. U. P. Nigeria, 1973.
- Adeoye, C. L. *Igbagbo ati Esin Yoruba*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers Nig. Publishers Ltd., 1985.
- Awolalu, J. O. *Yoruba Sacrificial Rites and Rituals*. Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1979.
- Bascom, William. *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, W. Gesenius, Eds., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicons*. Indiana: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1978.
- Fatokun, Samson Adetunji. *Soteriology: An African Outlook (A Historical Study of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation from African Perspective)*. Ibadan: End-Time Publishing House Ltd., 2010.
- Idowu, E. B. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1962.
- Johnson, James. *Yoruba Heathenism*. Exeter: J. Townsend Press, 1899.
- King, Charles Spencer. "IFA Y Los Orishas: La Religion Antigua De LA Naturaleza"
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Nature's Ancient Religion :Orisha Worship & IFA"

- Neimark, Philip John. *The Way of The Orisa: Empowering Your Life Through The Ancient African Religion Of Ifa*. New York: Harper San Francisco, n.d.
- Olowola, Cornelius A. *African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith*. Achimota: African Christian Press, 1993.
- Peel, John. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Popoola, S. Solagbade & Fakunle Oyesanya, Ikunle Abiyamo: *The ASE of Motherhood 2007*.
- Popoola, S. Solagbade. *Ifa Dida*. Three Volumes. Library, Inc., 2011
- Wenger, Susanne and Gert Chesi. *A Life with the Gods in their Yoruba Homeland*. Worgi: Perlinger, 1983.

### **Electronic Sources**

- “Ela.” <http://yemitom.wordpress.com/tag/ela/> Accessed September 29, 2013.
- Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.
- “Orunmila,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orunmila> Accessed September 30, 2013.

### **Periodicals**

- ORITA – Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Volume 20, No. 1, June 1998.
- The Guardian*, April 25, 2004.

### **Interviews**

- Jegede, C. O. *Interview*. Doctor of Traditional Medicine and Lecturer in African Traditional Religion, University of Ibadan. February 24, 2005.
- Olateju, M. O. A. *Interview*. Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistic and African Languages, University of Ibadan. February 24, 2005.
- Oyelade, E. O. *Interview*. A Retired Professor of Religion, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. February 14, 2005.