

# ***The Famished Road* (1991)**

## **By Ben Okri (Nigeria, England)**

### **Notes for Section One, Book One**

#### **Section One, Book One, Chapter 1**

*In the beginning there was a river. (3)*

“The Yoruba describe their culture as ‘a river that is never at rest.’ The metaphor is apt, for it conveys the Yoruba sense of continuous change, of life as caught up within swift-moving currents that can run deep and quietly, or as turbulent and overpowering. It is not an image that implies a sense of fate or helplessness” (234).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

“The sacred nature of rivers and streams is explicated in various creation myths. In Yoruba cosmology, for instance, in the beginning was Olodumare the supreme God who sent the orishas (divinities), under the supervision of Obatala, to create the world from the primordial watery matter. After the creation of the world, the spirits did not return to the sky. It is believed that the 400 orishas that created the world entered the Earth’s crust instead and transformed themselves into rivers, trees, and mountains” (580).

Nkulu-N’Sengha, Mutombo. “Rivers and streams.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

*In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. (3)*

“The social world of the Yoruba consists of the living, the not-yet-born, and the deceased” (175).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

*They had returned inconsolable for all the love they had left behind, all the suffering they hadn’t redeemed, all that they hadn’t understood, and for all that they had barely begun to learn before they were drawn back to the land of origins. (3)*

“African traditional religion generally holds that the universe did not come into being on its own accord, and that there was a time when it did not exist. Many myths tell of the activities of a Creator, Moulder, Sculptor, Fashioner, Great Weaver, or Originator, who brought everything that exists into being. In some cases, the Creator used agents to carry out the task of creation, but the myths make it clear that those agents merely carried out orders and were not independent agents who acted on their own volition. The universe is one, but it has two aspects, visible and invisible, and these aspects constitute the reality of the universe.

The universe is populated by beings and beings presuppose relationships; there is an interconnectedness between all that exists. These beings are hierarchically arranged, and they all originate from one source. There are mystical powers whose existence is borne out by the practice of witchcraft, sorcery, medicine, rainmaking, and curing. These forces can be used to bring about pain and suffering and they can also be used to fight evil. Death is not the end of life, and the dead ancestors continue to be members of their families and societies and to wield influence over the living. The involvement of the dead in the affairs of society continues without interruption and there is a sense in which death increases a person’s powers, for the dead can punish or reward the living.

Communication with the dead is possible, through libations and offerings, dreams and possession. The dead are believed to return into the world and to be reborn and this belief is given

concrete expression in the names given to children indicating the return of a deceased person into life. Life therefore is a cycle of birth, maturation into adulthood and finally death, and the life cycle is renewable.

The spirit world is real and is inhabited by Divinity, the ancestral spirits, and agents, children, or messengers of Divinity called *orishas* by the Yoruba, Vodun by the Fon, and Abosom by the Akan. These latter spirits may take up residence in rivers, rocks, mountains, or shrines. As agents and messengers of Divinity, these spirits interact regularly with human beings and are interested in what happens in the human world” (783).

Opoku, Kofi A. “Religion: African Traditional Religion.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. (3)*

“In esoteric lore, cats are frequently seen to be liminal figures, possessing knowledge of the other world” (107).

Quayson, Ato. *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

*Tender sibyls, benign sprites, and the serene presences of our ancestors were always with us (4)*

“An important part of the cosmology of West African peoples, the belief in ancestors affirms that life continues after death, that the spirit realm is not an alien world inaccessible to humans, and that even after death, relationships are not eternally severed between the deceased and their living descendants. Among the major ethnic groups in West Africa such as the Akan (in Ghana and the Ivory Coast), the Ga (in Ghana), the Ewe (in Ghana and Togo), the Fon (in Benin), the Yoruba and Igbo (in Nigeria), those who have attained the status of ancestors are given honorific titles such as Nananom Nsamanfo (Akan), and Togbi Togbuiwo (Ewe). These titles literally mean ‘grandparents’” (2).

Dovlo, Elom. “Ancestors.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*Our minds are invaded by images of the future. We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world. (4)*

“Among the Yoruba, each human being is believed to have a dual makeup: the *ara* (physical) and the *emi* and *ori* (spiritual mien). *Olodumare* charged *Orisanla*, the arch-divinity with moulding *ara*, the physical body with clay, while *Olodumare* supplies the *emi* by breathing life into man. As the principle of predestiny, *ori* is the most important *orisa* as far as human welfare is concerned” (179).

Adogame, Afe. “Cosmology.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

*We longed for an early homecoming, to play by the river, in the grasslands, and in the magic caves. (5)*

“Aye, the world is visible, tangible realm of the living, including those invisible otherworldly forces that visit frequently and strongly influence human affairs. The importance and omnipresence of the otherworld in this world is expressed in a Yoruba saying, ‘The world is a marketplace [we visit], the otherworld is home’ (*Aye l’oja, orun n’ile*). A variant of this phrase, *Aye l’ajo, orun n’ile* (‘The world is a journey, the otherworld [afterlife] is home’), contrasts the movement and unpredictability of life with the haven of the afterworld that promises spiritual existence for eternity” (15-16).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

*We longed to meditate on sunlight and precious stones, and to be joyful in the eternal dew of the spirit. (5)*

“Dew symbolizes a soothing, pacifying, and regenerative force, one that accomplishes its task, not by aggression, but through persuasion and life-affirming qualities” (222).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

*When the time arrived for the ceremonies of birth to begin, the fields at the crossroads were brilliant with lovely presences and iridescent beings. (5)*

“The crossroads is a major concept in African religion. It is a pervasive idea that suggests there is a point where good and evil, humanity and divinity, the living and the Dead, the night and the day, and all other contradictions, opposites, and situations involving decisions must meet. At this point, there exists an intermediary to open the way, to provide humans with choice, and to teach wisdom at the gate. This gatekeeper goes by many names, but is known in the Yoruba as Legba, Eshu, or Ellegua depending on the language and country of practice.

In the sense that the crossroads is literally the place where several paths cross, where several roads intersect, it is really a philosophical concept. As such, the African idea is that, at the point of decision, the human has the possibility of touching divinity or forever remaining locked in mortality. As a profound philosophical concept and idea, the notion of crossroads sits at the entrance into the study of African religion, initiation, ritual performance, spiritual resources, benefits, and indeed reincarnation. One cannot escape the space of decision. Everything is decided, and in the greatest, most poignant moments of the spiritual quest, the human being must, out of relative ignorance of all the possibilities, choose and, by choosing, express an existential life that gives value and meaning to the quest. This is the first and last thing that must be done.

Because the Yoruba see Legba as the deity who stands at the crossroads, some have been inclined to see him as a trickster prepared to trick humans into making the wrong choice or having difficulty discovering right from wrong, but this explanation is limited. Legba is the personification of the space that belongs to no one; it is a space given to the person who is best able to negotiate its demands, and, as such, it is called the crossroads. Among the Yoruba, Legba’s music is the first and last played and he is the first invoked in a ceremony” (186).

Asante, Molefi Kete. “Crossroads.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

*You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. (6)*

“Although sometimes translated as ‘destiny,’ [the Yorùbá concept of *ìwà*] means more than mere destiny before which one is helpless. It includes the notion of character and the working out of one’s destiny within the limits of one’s character. Thus, a person’s future is not entirely determined. Neither is it entirely free. A person must come to know what propensities are to be found within his or her character and then work within those limitations” (49).

Salamone, Frank A. “A Yoruba Healer as a Syncretic Specialist.” *Reinventing Religions: Syncretism and Transformation in Africa and the Americas*. Ed. Sidney M. Greenfield and André Droogers. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

*Wondrous spirits danced around us to the music of gods (6)*

“It is difficult to state the precise number of the divinities. Yoruba oral tradition puts the census of divinities at varying numbers from 201, 401, 600, to 1,700. This pluralism of divinities probably results from the fact of a plural society, but in this diversity of many divinities, there is unity under one Supreme Being. The divinities may be male or female. For example, among the Yoruba, Orunmila and Sango are male, whereas Oya and Yemoja (Ye.mo.nja) are female. Divinities are held to be responsible for all the good and evil that happen on Earth. Humankind, therefore, can receive the prosperity, good health,

protection, wives and children, and all forms of good fortunes by offering regular sacrifices to the divinities. However, refusal to offer sacrifice or show gratitude may incur their wrath on oneself.

Each divinity has its own local name in the local language, which is descriptive either of the function allotted to the divinity or with the natural phenomena with which the divinity is associated. Divinities may well be described as “domesticated” spirits because they are a tutelary part of the community establishments.

They act as custodians of the people’s morality. In this capacity, they act as watchdogs for the Supreme Being and as checks against the excesses of human beings. They often represent instant justice and may be called on to vindicate the just. For example, *Ogun* is fierce, but not evil. He demands justice, fair play, and integrity. He is also protective of the poor and the dispossessed” (211)

Ayegboyin, Deji and Charles Jegede. “Divinities.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 2

*Because of my miraculous recovery they named me a second time (8)*

“Newborns are given special names, known as *oruko amutorunwa* (‘names brought from the otherworld’) that reflect their spiritual nature as revealed by the ways in which they arrived, their origins and their special qualities and potential. [...] Names known as *oruko abiso* are given after birth and provide other clues as to the nature of the person. *Oruku abiku*, for example, are names given to those who are reincarnations of themselves, that is, they are ‘children-born-to-die,’ meaning to be reborn frequently” (26).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

*But as I became the subject of much jest, and as many were uneasy with the connection between Lazaro and Lazarus, Mum shortened my name to Azaro. (8)*

John 11:1-46: <sup>1</sup>Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> (It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.) <sup>3</sup> Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. <sup>4</sup> When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. <sup>5</sup> Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was. <sup>7</sup> Then after that saith he to his disciples, Let us go into Judaea again. <sup>8</sup> His disciples say unto him, Master, the Jews of late sought to stone thee; and goest thou thither again? <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world. <sup>10</sup> But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because there is no light in him. <sup>11</sup> These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. <sup>12</sup> Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. <sup>13</sup> Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. <sup>14</sup> Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. <sup>15</sup> And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him. <sup>16</sup> Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellowdisciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him. <sup>17</sup> Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off: <sup>19</sup> And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. <sup>20</sup> Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house. <sup>21</sup> Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. <sup>22</sup> But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. <sup>23</sup> Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. <sup>24</sup> Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. <sup>25</sup> Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life:

he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: <sup>26</sup> And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? <sup>27</sup> She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world. <sup>28</sup> And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee. <sup>29</sup> As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto him. <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him. <sup>31</sup> The Jews then which were with her in the house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there. <sup>32</sup> Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. <sup>33</sup> When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled. <sup>34</sup> And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. <sup>35</sup> Jesus wept. <sup>36</sup> Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! <sup>37</sup> And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died? <sup>38</sup> Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. <sup>40</sup> Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God? <sup>41</sup> Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. <sup>42</sup> And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. <sup>43</sup> And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. <sup>44</sup> And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go. <sup>45</sup> Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him. <sup>46</sup> But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done.

*I also learnt that a herbalist had been summoned. (8)*

“Folk medicine in indigenous African societies is also concerned with the disharmony that results from human interactions and activities in their visible social world. Human beings have the potential to manipulate the invisible spiritual power in the universe to harm others out of jealousy and vengeance. In this regard there are medicines to counter the undeserved misfortune and suffering meted by witches, sorcerers, and the “evil eyed.” Some of the medicines associated with the social agents of disease and misfortune are either protective or curative. Traditional Africans with diseases and illnesses originating from the invisible spiritual world also associate the social world with misfortune. Health problems, which emanate from the African social world, are culturally constructed by the local people as the consequence of a breach of taboos and the disruption of social equilibrium that enhances human well-being in one way or another. Diseases that indigenous Africans directly or indirectly associate with breaches in the moral social order include those that are linked to lineage inheritance, malevolent spirits, and curses. In traditional belief systems, illnesses contracted through these agents and mechanisms mainly represent a disruption in spiritual equilibrium.

Traditional medicines, addressed to the spiritual causes of illness, underpin the folk notions about a person’s dual nature. The belief that a human being is both corporeal and nonmaterial is ubiquitous in sub-Saharan Africa. The invisible human life force in the African worldview is the intangible air or breath-like force given by God. This aspect of a person forms the human spiritual dimension, which stretches to eternity. This spiritual force, integrated with the human body, is usually affected by the consequences of evil deeds, naturally occurring cosmic imbalances, and human misbehavior. This conception of the double nature of human beings in traditional beliefs accounts for the application of organic matter to cure the organic person and the use of “nonempirical” medicines as spiritual remedies. This implies that African folk medicine draws from a traditional view in which good health goes beyond a simplistic perception of a healthy body only (Ngubane 1977)” (494).

Mulemi, Benson A. "Medicine: Overview." *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*He confessed to not being able to do anything about my condition, but after casting his cowries, and deciphering their signs, (8)*

"In a constantly changing world, it is difficult to have sufficient knowledge to act wisely. Nevertheless, answers to the mundane as well as extraordinary questions that arise daily are available. One has only to ask the correct question of the appropriate source and then be able to interpret the answer accurately. A diviner can perform these acts.

African diviners manage standardized procedures by which otherwise inaccessible information is revealed. Usually, this process is governed by an extensive body of esoteric knowledge, available only to the diviner. Occult communication is revealed through a mechanism, such as a diviner's basket of symbolic objects or cast cowrie shells, or directly through the diviner, acting as a spirit medium. Divination sessions are central to the expression and enactment of cultural truths as they are reviewed in the context of contemporary realities (Peek 1991)" (184).

Peek, Philip M. "Divination: Overview." *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*I tugged Mum across the street and a few moments later an **articulated lorry** plunged into the house we had been standing in front of and killed an entire family. (9)*

British usage: a truck and trailer

*They were dragging me back when we discovered that the compound was burning. (9)*

"Because the Yoruba, at least since the sixteenth century, have been an urban people, they maintain a primary family residence in town and use smaller rectangular buildings for shelter when working their farm plots, which can be located as much as twenty miles away. The Yoruba name for an urban compound is *agbo ile* (a flock of houses), a name which suggests that compounds are conceived as clusters of smaller buildings. The Yoruba compound house is best seen as a gathering of farm houses on an urban site. In the savannah region a traditional compound might be arranged around a broad, open courtyard more than 70 feet across, while in the rain forest area the compound was formed around a smaller courtyard sheltered by the extended roofs of its surrounding building units. The edges of these roofs are joined together around the edges of an impluvium, or shallow pool built to catch rain water" (18).

Vlach, John Michael. "Architecture" *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*Along the main road she put me down in order to tighten her wrapper (11)*

*called an iro in the Yoruba language; the wrapper is usually worn with a matching headscarf or head tie that is called a gele; a full wrapper ensemble consists of three garments: a blouse (buba), a wrap skirt (the iro proper), and a headscarf (the aforementioned gele)*

*Drums vibrated in the air. (11)*

"The combination of drumming, singing, and dancing is the major means by which many African cultures worship or interact with the divine. These practices are prevalent throughout African culture. The Yoruba of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana, West Africa, provide two such examples. In the Yoruba Bembe and Akan Akom (spiritual ceremonies), drummers', singers', and dancers' collective invoke the spirit of the ancestors, various deities, or the creator through music, song, and dance" (222).

Chike, Kefentse K. "Drum, The." *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

*Then a gigantic Masquerade burst out of the road (11)*

"In the Western popular imagination, masks and masked dances are probably the single most representative symbol of art making and performance in Africa. The very nature of African masquerade-- encompassing a disguise of the human face, elaborate costuming, choreography, and musical accompaniment-- imbues masquerade performance with aesthetic power and mystery.

The term mask usually defines the object that hides the human face or head. However, scholars routinely study the entire ensemble including the mask, the costume, the dance, and the musical and song accompaniment within its ritual or ceremonial context in order to fully understand the meanings and intent of the performance. [...]

Many masquerade performances may be thought of as secular, valued solely as sources of entertainment. More often, however masquerade transforms the masked dancer into a powerful animated spirit force. As masquerade suppresses human identity, it also transforms the dancer into a new and often powerful entity that suggests the supernatural realm. Two entities and realms are often evoked in masked performance. The first are ancestral spirits, who are thought to return to the temporal world to aid living members of the community. The other are localized nature spirits who, like ancestral spirits, demand respect, but also reward the community with good health, a bountiful harvest, and many children" (479-480).

Binkley, David A. "Masks and Masquerades." *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 3

*All around her feet were metal gongs, kola nuts, kaoline, feathers of eagles and peacocks, bones of animals and bones too big to belong to animals. (13)*

Kola nuts are the fruit of the kola tree, native to the tropical rainforests of Africa; the kola nut has a bitter flavor and contains caffeine; it is chewed in many West African cultures, individually or in a group setting and is often used ceremonially. Kaoline is a fine clay.

*Her mighty and wondrous pregnancy faced the sea. (13)*

"As the diviner Ositola explained, 'If a person neglects his or her shrine [by not offering prayers or gifts] the spirits will leave... All you are seeing are the images... The person has relegated the deities to mere *idols*, ordinary images.' Or as another priest declared, 'If you don't feed it, it will die.' Art is important, therefore, in worshipping the orisa [spirits of ancestors and personified natural forces]. The creation of artifacts for shrines and their placement is an act of devotion that equals the ritual significance of prayer or sacrifice. The Yoruba say that shrine is the 'face' (*oju*) of the divinity or the 'face of worship' (*oju*). The shrine is the place of meetings, of facing the gods and locating oneself relative to the gods" (26).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 4

*That night I slept under a lorry. (15)*

British usage: truck

*mountainous women with faces of iroko (15)*

a large hardwood tree from the west coast of tropical Africa  
*After a while I noticed a giant turtle beside me. (16)*

“[In African folklore] the turtle often plays a prominent role as a sympathetic, intelligent, and bright animal, comparable to the fox in European stories” (681).

Seibert, Gerhard. “Performing Arts of São Tomé and Príncipe.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 6

*And next to the saucer was the image of a little feathered goddess. (22)*

“There are no contradictions in the minds of Africans who profess one religion and believe in another. [...] There is yet another dimension to religious expression in urban Africa. It concerns the evolution of indigenous churches which, perhaps because of their largely adaptive, integrative, or synthetic nature, have continued to enjoy remarkable congregational growth. By mixing popular cultural elements with important aspects of Christian belief, some churches have emerged to redefine Christianity and popularize a new liturgy. This is referred to by some people as religious syncretism” (276).

Jegede, Dele. “Popular Culture in Urban Africa.” *Africa. Third Edition*. Ed. Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O’Meara. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

*The officer waved the fetish in the air. (22)*

“The word *fetish* comes from the Portuguese substantive *feitício*, which comes from the Latin noun *facticius*, meaning an artificial or manufactured object. However, the sense in Portuguese was not so much artificial as artful, and in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Portugal, the term was applied to religious objects such as relics and rosaries of saints. Consequently, Portuguese explorers of West Africa extended the term *feitício* to functionally similar indigenous “charms and idols.”

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the word entered the English language from Portuguese; at the same time, the Portuguese word *fetissero* became in English *fetisher* or medicine person. In the meantime, the French had borrowed the Portuguese term, which became *fétiche*. It is this French form that gave rise to the current English spelling *fetish* and the less common spelling *fetich*, defined as an object regarded as having magical or spiritual powers and worshiped. [...]

Today [...] African experts and scholars of the Vodun religion use the term *Fetish* to refer to African divinities or gods. [...] Just as in Christianity and most other major religions, sacred symbolic representations are made of the divine forces and spiritual manifestations of God. In looking at the symbolic representations of African deities/Fetishes, Westerners or any outsiders may see man-made artificial objects, but [...] devotees see gods revealing themselves to humans through the spirits thus represented” (265-267).

Houessou-Adin, Thomas. “Fetish.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

“All otherworldly entities have material manifestations in the world. Such presences are given imaginative form in every one of the Yoruba arts. The sacred arts serve to focus and intensify worship by attracting spiritual forces with their aesthetic power. They are not ‘idols,’ that is, the objects of worship. Rather they help intensify and focus devotions. As the ‘face’ of the divinity, or the *ojubu*, Yoruba sacred art is the point of contact with invisible otherworldly forces” (230).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 7

*When I blinked I saw ghosts around the police officer and his wife. (25)*

“Most West African peoples hold that after death one must cross a river between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors, so as to be integrated into ancestral spiritual segments of their families. This is the ideal after-life scenario, in which one finds peace in being reunited with the family. It reaffirms the sense of community that forms the basis for the entire cult of the ancestors. Those who do not cross this river become “wandering ghosts.” They remain restless in the world of the living and are considered hostile to the living” (4).

Dovlo, Elom. "Ancestors." *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*The rope transformed into a thread of lightning. (27)*

“In Africa, lightning carries an important symbolism and is often associated with the workings of the divine. Because much of Africa is covered by rain forests that depend on clouds and rain, the presence of lightning is not unexpected. [...]

Lightning is ubiquitous. Each second, there are approximately 65 cloud-to-ground lightning strikes to the Earth throughout the world [...] Africans have known all forms of the lightning and therefore have managed to explain it in mythological or philosophical terms that make sense to their societies.

Africa has the greatest amount of lightning flashes on the Earth. Indeed, it is believed that the small town of Kifuka, Democratic Republic of Congo, in the Eastern region near the borders with Rwanda and Burundi, has the highest density of lightning flashes in the world. For example, out of the 1.4 billion times that lightning flashes over the Earth, a great amount of that energy is spent in the continent of Africa, where Kifuka receives 158 lightning bolts per kilometer per year. This compares with a European average of about 28 lightning bolts per kilometer per year. In Colombia, South America, one can have 110 lightning bolts per kilometer per year, making it the second most active place for lightning. North America, in Florida, is only about 59 bolts per kilometer in a year” (380).

Asante, Molefi Kete. “Lightning.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 8

*On the centre table, in front of him, there was a half empty bottle of **ogogoro** (28)*

a west African alcoholic drink, distilled from the juice of Raffia palm trees

*Mum had hardly stepped in when the herbalist, a fierce-looking woman with one eye that glittered more than the other, told her from the shadows that she knew the purpose of Mum’s visit. (30)*

“Mostly women, herbalists could be described as medicine men and women par excellence because they possess the science and art of making use of several substances from animals and plants, as well as supernatural forces, in therapeutic activities.

They acquire as much knowledge as they can from their masters and mistresses. The competence of an herbalist depends greatly on the depth of the knowledge and skill of his or her tutor, the vegetative materials available in the training environment, the duration of the apprenticeship, the kind of diseases that are addressed during his or her apprenticeship, and his or her own level of intelligence, as well as his or her attitude (patience, endurance, faithfulness, painstakingness, etc.) to the teacher.

A successful herbalist possesses knowledge of and skill in using medicines, animals, insects, eggs, and shells; the nature of physical objects; the nature of spirits and the living-dead; and many other

secrets. All of the materials derive their efficacy, power, and use from primordial origins, with the effect that, as the practitioners would claim among the Yoruba, the existential power and names that they symbolically apply in their practice command healing on their clients.

Herbalists deal primarily with individual problems, paying much attention to each client to be able to deal with such a case spiritually, psychologically, and physically. They cure and prevent diseases, and they intervene between the client (victim) and the witches. They solicit the assistance of spiritual forces who maintain ontological equilibrium in the universe” (416).

Ogungbile, David O. “Medicine.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

*When Mum returned with the items the woman, attired in a severe black smock, consulted her cowries. (30)*

Seashells, in general, belong to the vast family of mollusks, which are a myriad mix of animals. They have been used by humans as a food supply, naturally decorated and collected items from the sea, as currency, decoration, adornment, signaling horns, protective amulets, and tools for spiritual divination. Cowrie shells, derived from small snail-like creatures native to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, became important in the culture and religion of Africa. In the ethos, belief, and soul of many African-descended people, cowrie shells speak a symbolic spiritual language on artifacts, garments-- and about the past, present, and future. They are also used as tools in spiritual divination oracle readings (180-181).

Changa, Ibo. “Cowrie Shells.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

*'I have broken all the spells except one. That one is too powerful for me. Only lightning can break that spell.'*  
(30)

“The professional skill of a medicine-man includes, curing, alleviating and preventing diseases as well as restoring and preserving health. In many cases, he is a diviner, a priest as well as a manufacturer of charms. He has the means of ascertaining the causes of ailments, misfortunes and death. He employs different means including herbs) plants, leaves, roots, barks, animals, birds, skins, bones, rings, brooms, pieces of thread, needles' and minerals, to do his 'business'. In almost all cases, he has some magical words to go with his preparation. And so, unavoidably, magic finds a place in the practice of medicine. 'In fact', observes Ìdòwú , 'the two can become so interlinked as to make it difficult to know where one ends and the other begins'.

The truth is that the medicine-man does not see his medical preparation in isolation. His medicine is in the realm of religion, perhaps with some element of magic. In many cases, when he goes to collect leaves or barks or roots of trees for his medicinal preparation, he performs some rituals-- he usually invokes the spirit in the tree or herb, he breaks kola-nuts and offers them to the spirit. Sometimes, he provides a small piece of white calico which he ties round a tree before he can take its bark or roots for medicinal preparation. At other times, he has to utter incantations as he digs for roots or picks leaves. On some occasions, he does not speak until he has taken back home his collection. In this way, the herbs or leaves or barks are treated as changed from the ordinary things into the 'sacred' and they carry some potency, some mysterious powers. [...]

Furthermore, the medicine-man makes offerings to the spirit of his medicine from time to time. He chews kola-nuts and alligator pepper and spits these on the medicine as he utters incantations and prays that its power may be retained. He sometimes offers blood in addition to gin, kola-nuts or alligator pepper. What we are stressing here is the fact that medicine, as conceived by the Yoruba, is believed to have something *extra*-- a mysterious power which can cure or prevent ailments but in some cases could be used to do harm to an enemy” (72-73).

Awolalu, J. Omosade. *Yorùbá Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. Brooklyn: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1979.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 9

*The more I took in the cracks in the walls, the holes in the zinc ceiling, the cobwebs, the smells of earth and garri, (32)*

a popular West African food made from cassava tubers

*It was meant to be an impersonation of the insane soldier who had fought the British wars in Burma. (33)*

i.e., the Asian theater of WWII (as a British soldier)

*We stopped at the first palm-wine bar we came across. (35)*

West African palm-wine (*oguro*) is an alcoholic beverage created from wild date palms or from oil palm. Typically the sap is collected from the cut flower of the palm tree. A container is fastened to the flower stump to collect the sap. The white liquid that initially collects tends to be very sweet and non-alcoholic before it is fermented. If the palm-wine is actually distilled, then it becomes *ogogoro*.

*He ordered a gourd of palm-wine (35)*

“The hollowed-out gourd is used as a container throughout sub-Saharan Africa. As the fruit of one of the continent’s earliest cultivated plants, the gourd or calabash, as it is commonly if imprecisely called, has long been exploited and selectively adapted by both nomadic and sedentary peoples” (307).

Berns, Marla C. “Gourds: Their Uses and Decoration.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*I sat beside him on the wooden bench, drinking as he drank, taking in the smells of the bar, its odours of stale wine, peppersoup, and fish-sacks. (35)*

a broth-like savory, spicy soup made with assorted meat or poultry and local spices; the “pepper” comes from uziza seeds and/or leaves (so-called West African or Ashanti pepper)

*Then he began a game of draughts. (35)*

British usage: checkers

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 10

*He went off and I listened to his footsteps recede into the forest. (38)*

“Hunting has important sacred dimensions. Forests are not only the abode of animals, but also of spirits” (221).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

*Behind her were three more women, bearing basins of jollof rice, yams, beans, eba, and fried plantains. (41)*

Jollof rice is a popular dish in many parts of West Africa; the most common basic ingredients are rice, tomatoes and tomato paste, onion, salt, and red pepper; beyond that, nearly any kind of meat, vegetable, or spice can be added. Eba is a staple food eaten in West Africa made from cassava flour (*gari*) boiled with water until it achieves a doughy consistency; a small amount is rolled in the hand, then dipped into a soup or sauce before being eaten.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 11

*The old man made a libation at both posts of the door (42)*

“Libation is a magico-religious ritual that entails pouring liquid on the ground, or sprinkling it on ritual participants or sacred objects, as a means of communication between human and spiritual beings. [...]

In traditional African cultures, libations accompany sacrifices, rites of passage, and prayers. In litany proceedings, the participants recall the meditative links between spiritual beings and people. Libations are generally intended to earn the favor of supernatural beings or spirits. In traditional African religions, (as in ancient religions, such as those of the Babylonians and the Assyrians), libations could be poured as separate offerings to spirits, gods, and God, through the ancestors. In traditional belief, ancestors dwell in the ground as masters of the land. Participants in the libation believe that the ancestral spirits can effectively receive milk, honey, oil, beer, or other beverages through the ground. The libations are poured onto the earth through natural or artificial cracks, openings, or holes. The preferred sites for religious libations are gravesides, alters, homestead shrines, and sacred groves.

The main objective of libations in indigenous African religious and social contexts is to appease ancestral and other spirits, thus encouraging their continued favor and good will. Such rituals are also meant to propitiate spirits that cause disease and other calamities. The libations are therefore intended to prevent illness or misfortune, protect human beings, and facilitate curing” (423-424).

Mulemi, Benson A. “Libation.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*Amid the discontentment, Dad tried hard to please everyone. He made jokes, **told riddles**, (43)*

“All African societies reveal a distinct taste for enigmatic games. These come in many forms, of which two are especially common. The first consists of a brief, enigmatic definition calling for one right answer, which in English is called a riddle. The second is a short narrative, called a dilemma tale, which proposes an unsolvable enigma for the audience to debate. Often such a tale revolves around three heroes, who accomplish extraordinary feats. The puzzle’s solution may be determined by deciding which of the three is the bravest and/or the strongest. In many societies these two forms are considered as evolving from the same genre and are, in fact, designated by the same term” (792).

Derive, Jean. “Riddles.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 13

*But the others hung around Mum’s stall (51)*

“Street vendors are found everywhere in Africa: at bus and train stations, taxi stands, and city street corners. Competition is fierce, so one has to work hard to attract buyers. Amounts are small-- a box of matches, a few oranges, fried cakes-- so one must sell as much as possible to earn a decent wage” (276).

Akiwowo, Akinsola “Foodways: Yoruba Food Venders.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*My eyeballs became hot. Dad, noticing what was happening to me, snatched me from Mum’s frightened embrace, and made me drink of the bitter **dongoyaro**, as a precaution. (53)*

called the neem tree outside of Nigeria; various parts of the tree are commonly used in herbal remedies

*talking in low business tones as though they were about to form a **limited liability company**. (53)*

British usage: corporation

*When I got back to the room, Dad had dressed up in his black French suit. He offered libations to his ancestors, and prayed for Mum's recovery. (54)*

“Worship and prayer to God are conducted through the ancestors, who inhabit a mediating role. The ancestors continue to have interest in their surviving descendants, who continue to “live” in spiritual forms. They understand the needs of their living relatives, which these ancestors are more qualified to transmit to God as they share His spiritual nature. Libations are poured on the ground in front of a shrine or an object representing the ancestors during acts of prayer (Odak 1995). In this case, offerings of drink and food are perceived by the people as ways in which the ancestors can be convinced to listen to their prayers and traffic them to the supernatural.

As an important component of spirituality and worship, libation, along with sacrifice, acts as a medium of trade between human beings and ancestors. This ritual is used to demonstrate the people's seriousness in seeking spiritual assistance” (425).

Mulemi, Benson A. “Libation.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

*The blue mist grew thicker over her like steam from a boiling cauldron of water, and it collected and became more defined, and I grew really scared when the mist changed colours rapidly, becoming green, then yellow, turning red, bursting into a golden glow, and back to blue again. (55)*

“Eleda is a part of the Yoruba concept of the human being. Indeed, the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria contend that all humans who die live again after death. Of course, each human being has three aspects to existence: *emi*, the spirit; *ojiji*, the shadow; and *eleda*, the guardian soul.

The *emi* inhabits a person's lungs and heart and lives by the wind and air that come through the nostrils. One cannot live at all without *emi*; it is essential to everything. If one cannot breathe, then one cannot exist. So the Yoruba say that *emi* is important for working, walking, running, dancing, celebrating, hearing, making love, caring for children, and seeing. [...]

According to the Yoruba, before a person dies, his *emi* appears to his or her relatives to announce that the person will die. It is believed that the person who senses the *emi* can tell when it comes because it feels cool, although the person dying may be in a distant place” (238).

Asante, Molefi Kete. “Eleda.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

*The chicken's blood burst out from the gash, staining the air, splattering my face, deepening the red of her blouse. The blood poured into a hole she had dug in the earth and the chicken fought, its comb rising and falling, its mouth opening and shutting in its final spasms, and when it died its eyes were open. (56)*

“Sacrifice, offerings, and libations are closely related because they constitute a significant component of African worship. Sacrifices involve the slaughter of a domestic animal to God or ethnic divinities through the ancestors. Although blood is a rare form of libation, it is poured as an expression of the seriousness of calamities such as drought, floods, epidemics, and death. In both agricultural and pastoralist communities, the blood shed from the animal is the greatest and ultimate form of libation, one which reconciles people with God and other divinities” (426).

Mulemi, Benson A. “Libation.” *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah. New York: Routledge, 2004.

## Section One, Book One, Chapter 14

*The corpse of a bat lay by her face. (61)*

“[For the Yorùbá] bats are used as sacrifices and are associated with *aje* (witches) because of their nocturnal habits, and because they suckle their young like humans but can fly like birds, the primary symbol of witches. There is a saying, ‘A bat hanging upside down still sees everything [that the birds/witches are up to].’ Another Yorùbá saying, ‘bats are neither birds, nor animals,’ is a clear expression of their liminality and uniqueness” (125).

Drewal, John, John Pemberton III, with Rowland Abiodun. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. Ed. Allen Wardell. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989.

*‘I can’t agree. He is going to school.’ (63)*

“[One] major cultural development brought about by colonial rule was the growth of the class of Western-educated Nigerians. Until roughly the last decade of the nineteenth century the majority of European- educated Africans in Nigeria were “receptive” slaves or their descendants, known as Saro, who had returned to Nigeria from Sierra Leone. [...]

By the late nineteenth century, however, increasing numbers of Nigerians were taking advantage of the opportunities that a European education in a mission school could offer, of which the most notable was the ability to read and write in English. With the onset of colonial administration and the expansion of the colonial economy based on increased import-export commerce from the 1890s, the ability to read and write in English became the stepping stone to a middle-class career. European-educated Nigerians could find reasonably paid jobs as clerks in the native courts or councils, or in other civil service positions in the colonial regime. They could also work as clerks or intermediaries for the European trading firms that dominated the export trade. Still others went into the service of the Church, often becoming teachers in the very schools in which they had been educated. [...]

For the most part, European education in Nigeria was limited to primary education or industrial training. It was not initially thought that secondary schools or universities would be necessary or practical in Nigeria. European education was limited mostly to rudimentary reading and writing skills, as well as instruction in Christian theology. The vast majority of European-educated Nigerians therefore received at best full primary education; many received only a partial primary education. [...]

Education opportunities remained limited; even those who received the most limited training improved their chances of finding employment with the colonial government or the European trading firms, however. [...] The expansion of the colonial export economy therefore had a significant impact on the demand for European education in southern Nigeria, where the bulk of European commerce took place” (126-127).

Falola, Toyin and Matthew M. Heaton. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

*At first your father refused and then out of pride he accepted. (69)*

“The social life of the Yorùbás also rests on the concept of ‘*omolúábí*’. An ‘*omolúábí*’ is an individual who possesses moral perfection. ‘Charity begins at home’: as a result the Yorùbás will, through the lineage, inculcate good moral in their children. Humility is the watchword of the Yorùbás. A Yorùbá person is expected to be polite in all manners of life. Pride is like an abomination among the Yorùbá people, no matter how rich a person can be [...] The Yorùbás believe strongly in what the Christian ‘Holy Writ’ says that ‘Pride goes before a fall.’ A proud person is so much detested by the Yorùbá people that no one talks well about him. No appreciation is given to whatever goodness he tries to do; he has no name as far as the Yorùbás are concerned,” (9-10).

Adelodun, Ruth E. *A Brief on History, Culture, and Language of the Yorùbá People*. Oyo: Odumatt Press, 1999.

'Yes, I came to the city.' (70)

"The urbanization that had accompanied colonial rule exploded in the 1950s to unprecedented levels. Lagos, which had an estimated population of 126,000 in 1931, ballooned to over 274,000 by 1951, and by 1963 was home to over 675,000 people. Lagos is the most dramatic example, but rapid urbanization occurred throughout the country. In the eastern part of the country, where no city had a population higher than 26,000 in 1931, four cities boasted populations of over 50,000 by 1952. As in previous decades, people flocked to cities for employment and other economic opportunities, but cities offered more than hope for jobs. Urban areas developed completely different cultures and lifestyles from rural areas. Cities became attractive symbols of a new, modern Nigeria to many young people who wanted a change from the traditional rural lifestyle. Cities offered urban amenities such as running water, electricity, and European schools, all of which drew people from the rural areas. Cities became cosmopolitan centers where people and cultures from throughout Nigeria, west Africa, and the world came together, learned from each other, and drew on each other, while rural areas remained more ethnically and culturally homogeneous" (154).

Falola, Toyin and Matthew M. Heaton. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

'Your grandfather is completely blind now. He is the head-priest of our shrine, Priest of the God of Roads. Anyone who wants a special sacrifice for their journeys, undertakings, births, funerals, whatever, goes to him. (70)

"The Yoruba *Odu Ifa* says that when there is imbalance in the spiritual universe, God requires only one thing: sacrifice. Therefore, prayers, colloquial solicitations, praise songs, invocations, and incantations may be correct and useful, but in the end, to make the cosmic and communal order correct and in harmony, it is necessary for sacrifice. Sacrifices of lambs, goats, chickens, and other domesticated animals are the type that are usually accepted as influential in the cosmic order. On special occasions among some African groups, the sacrifice of a cow or bull represents the greatest possible offering to the ancestors and God" (478-479).

Asante, Molefi Kete. "Offering." *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.

'I was supposed to succeed him as priest but the elders of the village said: (70)

"In the Yoruba tradition, the distinction between an older person and an Elder reflects a significant shift in personal and collective responsibilities. Generally, it is the responsibility of adult men to protect and defend the community, whereas adult women's responsibility is to nurture and educate the community. Accordingly, adult men are often consumed with the purpose and task of obtaining and providing those resources that sustain and advance life for themselves and their families. Likewise, adult women's time and interests are devoted to securing and establishing an environment or area that is conducive to the growth and development of life for them and their families.

The symbol of eldership for the Yoruba is the Onile, which is represented by two iron figurine spikes (one male, one female) joined at the head with a chain. The Yoruba believe that the head is the site of the spiritual essence of the person. The Onile symbolizes the sacred bond shared between the male and female elders and the importance of "the couple." The emphasis on sexual attributes of the Onile is designed to convey the mystical power of procreation and the omnipotence of the Elders. [...]

When men enter the community of Elders, they take on the role of *Baba Agba*, which means "senior father" or, more correctly, "nurturing father." When women enter the community of Elders, they take on the role of *Iya Agba*, which means "senior mother" or "warrior mother." It is the *Iya Agba* who plays the primary role as the spiritual protectors of the community. With the status of Eldership, women

are devoted to protecting and defending (warrior mother) the spiritual balance of the community, whereas men are dedicated to securing and establishing (nurturing father) the spiritual harmony in the community. At the onset of Eldership, the balance and complementarities of the male and female principles are inviolate and always present" (237).

Nobles, Wade W. "Elders." *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Los Angeles: Sage, 2009.