

SOME NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY AND PRONUNCIATION

The Yoruba language is a tonal language with three relative tone (or pitch) bands represented by acute accents over the high tones, grave accents over the low tones, and no diacritical marks over the middle tones. Yoruba has eighteen consonants, seven oral vowels, and five nasal vowels, plus a syllabic nasal. All the vowels have a tone and can be marked by subdots, as can the consonant “ş.” For example:

high tone—òkó (hoe)
middle tone—òkọ (husband)
low tone—òkò (boat)

Subdots indicate the following pronunciations:

e as in gay
ẹ as in net
o as in boat
ọ as in hot
s as in so
ş as in show

The letter “n” at the end of a word or before a consonant nasalizes the preceding vowel (as in French), and the sequence “an” becomes almost identical in pronunciation to “on,” resulting in near homophones such as *efan* and *efon*. Written “p” is pronounced as the voiceless labial-velar stop “kp” where “k” and “p” are simultaneously pronounced, and the labial-velar stop “gb” is its voiced counterpart.

In Brazil, the language employed in Candomblé rituals is called Nagô. It does not have any subdots and loses the three

tones, often transforming the Yoruba high tone into a circumflex accent: the Yoruba *ilé* (house) becoming the Nagô *ilê* (house of worship or *terreiro*). In Brazilian Portuguese, the circumflex accent marks a closed vowel, and the acute accent an open vowel (as in Candomblé). The consonant “x” corresponds phonetically to the Yoruba “ṣ”: e.g., *Èṣù* in Yoruba is *Exu* in Portuguese and *Eshou* in English.

I shall use the Yoruba orthography when analyzing the role of this divinity in the Yoruba pantheon, and the Brazilian orthography when referring to its Brazilian counterpart. This choice is a significant one and runs contrary to the current use of Yoruba terms in anthropological writings on traditional Candomblé, which aim to highlight its African origins. My decision to use the Brazilian orthography serves a different purpose: to show how Candomblé is primarily a Brazilian religious product. I shall use capital letters when referring to the name of a god or a spirit, and small letters for generic terms such as *caboclos*, *orixás*, or *pretos-velhos*; therefore I will write of Exu in Candomblé and of exus in Umbanda. Vernacular terms are listed in the glossary.

Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.