

Myths are a product of a specific time and place

This essay will focus on Oludumaré, the supreme creator god of the Yoruba religion and how he demonstrates that the socio-political, cultural and geographical context behind the Yoruba religion clearly shows that myths are not a product of a specific time and place. It will look at the wider historical context behind the Yoruba people, as well as Oludumaré's role in Yoruba society and how the myth of Oludumaré reflects aspects of Yoruba society and culture.

To begin, it is imperative that myth be defined. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “an ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts.”¹, Whereas, Britannica defines it as “a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional.”² For the purpose of this essay, myth will be defined as ‘a narrative or person which is part of a greater mythos intended to teach the morals and ideals of a people’.

When looking at whether Oludumaré is a product of a specific time and place, it would be logical to separate the statement into two parts. First, what could be considered the easiest to disprove, is he a product of a specific place? This is difficult to define, how specific is a specific place, for a start? In some instances it could be said that he is the product of the Yoruba region, however, the Yoruba region is vast and it wouldn't be logical to say that he was the product of Ile-Ife, a much more specific part of the Yoruba Region. This therefore makes it staggeringly difficult to determine whether he is the product of a specific place.

The Yoruba mainly inhabit areas of southwestern Nigeria, along with Benin and Togo³. The Yoruba people have a long lineage, being identifiable for centuries and while they may have been spread out across a far area, they had many kingdoms of grand size with many of the cities still existing today such as Oyo and Ile-Ife.⁴ This shows just how prominent and powerful the Yoruba were and still are, though their power and influence did decline in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁵ Cities such as Ile-Ife were particularly venerated by the Yoruba as religious cities. Ile-Ife was heralded as the holy city and is the centre of all Yoruba myth, religion and philosophy, playing a significant role in the Yoruba beliefs.⁶ The political system of the Yoruba Kingdoms was highly complex, in fact, “The Yoruba king was more than a chief; he was a divine king and the personification of the whole town.”⁷ Despite the differences in political and religious beliefs between each other Yoruba Kingdoms, they all still believed that the King was a representation of the divine, a representation of Oludumaré. With the large spread of the Yoruba religion and

¹ Cambridge Dictionary, *Myth*, <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/myth>>, (unknown date), accessed: 13 March 2025.

² Britannica, *Myth*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth>>, (2025), accessed: 13 March 2025.

³ Britannica, *Yoruba*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yoruba>>, (2025), accessed: 13 March 2025.

⁴ Britannica, *Yoruba*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yoruba>>, (2025), accessed: 13 March 2025.

⁵ Britannica, *Yoruba*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yoruba>>, (2025), accessed: 13 March 2025.

⁶ Britannica, *The Philosophy of the Yoruba*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Philosophy-of-the-Yoruba-2006354>>, (2015), accessed: 13 March 2025.

⁷ P. C. Lloyd, *The Traditional Political System of the Yoruba*, The University of Chicago West Press Journals, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3628833>>, (1954), p.373.

beliefs across parts of Nigeria, Benin and Togo, it is difficult to be able to specify that any religious and mythological aspects of Oludumaré came from one specific region and therefore it is nearly impossible to say that the myth of Oludumaré is from a specific place.

Oludumaré is the supreme being of the Yoruba religion and pantheon, he is the creator of the universe and responsible for all other divine beings, known as Orisha.⁸ He is a remote being who delegates tasks to the other Orishas, such as tasking Obatala with creating the Earth and eventually the humans. He was tasked with creating the Earth and equipping it with palm trees and other objects that would lead to successful life. Hens and pigeons were set upon earth by Oludumaré and when Obatala had successfully created the earth and molded the lifeless forms of 16 humans, he gave the humans life.⁹ This clearly shows a close relationship between Oludumaré and the Orishas, working together to create and help. However, it also shows that Oludumaré and the Orishas have a seemingly professional relationship, they carry out his whims, but he has the final authority on anything as shown with him giving life to the humans Obatala had created. This may be a reflection of the social and political beliefs that were discussed in the previous paragraph, it reflects how a King should be. The King is a reflection of Oludumaré and therefore must delegate tasks to lower beings while still holding all the ultimate power over the tasks. It shows Oludumaré to be omnipotent and at the same time, rather withdrawn from others. He has the power to command the orishas and the forces of nature, while also distancing himself from tasks which is perhaps how the Kings of the Yoruba religions may have been perceived or wanted to be perceived. A distant being with ultimate power. Oludumaré has a divine power over humans and Orishas, examples of this are his ability to grant Ori and Ase. Ori “determines the existence and fate of the individual on the earth.”¹⁰ and Ase is “the divine power of Olodumare”¹¹. Oludumaré clearly is seen to be omnipotent through his ability to grant and wield these forces of nature, it could reflect how the Kings of the Yoruba Kingdoms were responsible for the fate of the Yoruba people and therefore had a divine power over them.

It is quite clear that Oludumaré is not a product of a specific time and place. When looking at the cultural context Oludumaré is clearly the product of the need for a role model for the Kings. The Kings of the Yoruba can also trace their “origin back to the mythical Oduduwa”¹² who is seen as

⁸ Oxford Reference, *Olodumare Moves Away From The Earth*, <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100249155>>, (unknown date), accessed: 13 March 2025.

⁹ Oxford Reference, *Olodumare Moves Away From The Earth*, <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100249155>>, (unknown date), accessed: 13 March 2025.

¹⁰ Babatunde Lawal, *Ori: The Significance of the Head in Yoruba Sculpture*, The University of Chicago Press Journals, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3630272>>, (1985), p.91.

¹¹ Babatunde Lawal, *Ori: The Significance of the Head in Yoruba Sculpture*, The University of Chicago Press Journals, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3630272>>, (1985), p.91.

¹² The Guardian, *The Royal Dynasty of Ile-Ife: Ancient rule, contemporary influence*, <<https://guardian.ng/art/the-royal-dynasty-of-ile-ife-ancient-rule-contemporary-influence/>>, (2023), accessed: 13 March 2025.

an ancestor of the Yoruba, and acts as a “divine emissary”¹³ to Oludumaré. This therefore shows that the entire political structure was based around the belief that Oludumaré was the supreme being who they followed. Consequently, Oludumaré represents all the Yoruba Kings and their power, Oludumaré is the representation of Kingship. The idea that the King is a representation of the supreme divine being is not unique to the Yoruba, Ancient Egyptian tradition also held the King as a divine being, often associated with Ra and Horus¹⁴. This therefore means that the idea of divine kingship is not unique to the Yoruba and therefore it can not show that the myth of Oludumaré is the product of a specific place.

After having looked at whether Oludumaré is a product of a specific place, the next thing to discuss is whether he can be considered a product of a specific time. This again, is difficult to discuss as the Yoruba religion and Oludumaré has been worshipped for centuries. This therefore means that Oludumaré can not be a product of a specific time if he is constantly being worshipped and changed to fit the morals of the current age.

His role as the representation of Kingship is a clear example to begin with as to why Oludumaré can not be considered a product of a specific time. Kingship is not a fixed ideal, the role of kingship changes throughout the generations and what people expect of a “good king” changes too along with the morals and principles of a people, this therefore means that Oludumaré can not be a product of a specific time as he must represent the ideals of kingship from many different times and must be adapted to fit new ideals.

Along with this, Oludumaré is still being worshipped today, in the Yoruba regions and even across the world. The Yoruba religion as a whole has shifted and become part of something bigger, it has laid the groundwork for many syncretic religions throughout the Americas due to colonialism, such as Candomblé in Brazil which blends the Yoruba religion with Roman Catholicism.¹⁵ With the blending of the Yoruba religion with other religions such as Catholicism, it has led to an even greater shift in the idea of Oludumaré. Once seen as the representation of kingship for the Yoruba kings, he is now likened to the God of Catholicism. Both still worship his role as the supreme creator of the universe, but Oludumaré’s role has shifted and in Brazil, he is no longer the representation of the ideal king. This therefore shows that Oludumaré and myths change over time and therefore can not be pinpointed to a specific time, the ideals behind the myth are constantly changing to fill a purpose and therefore can not be defined under one specific time frame.

Oludumaré has also come to represent much more than just kingship. Figures of African religions such as Oludumaré, Yemanjá and Obatala, have come to have a more important

¹³ The Guardian, *The Royal Dynasty of Ile-Ife: Ancient rule, contemporary influence*, <<https://guardian.ng/art/the-royal-dynasty-of-ile-ife-ancient-rule-contemporary-influence/>>, (2023), accessed: 13 March 2025.

¹⁴ Britannica, *The Divine or Semidivine King*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/sacred-kingship/The-divine-or-semidivine-king>>, (2023), accessed: 13 March 2025.

¹⁵ Britannica, *Brazil*, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Brazil/Language#ref312838>> (2025), accessed: 13 March 2025.

meaning to the descendants of the African slaves that were brought to the Americas during the 17th and 18th centuries as part of the slave trade. They represent their ancestry, the struggle of those that came before and their identity as African descendants. This therefore shows that the very core of a myth and what it represents can change with changing socio-political world and therefore can not be deemed to be specific to a certain time and space. Oludumaré's role has changed to fit the needs of the people who worship him, just as he always has and always will. But even with the changing roles of Kingship to a representation of African culture, he is still the representation of unity. Unity of the Yoruba people under the rule of a King, and the unity of the African-Brazilian people who unify under their shared heritage. The fact that he has been worshipped from Africa to South America across centuries shows that he is not a product of a specific time and place.

A key aspect of myth is that it needs to be adaptable. The opinions and homes of the people that believe in it are constantly going to be changing, myths that survive are ones that surpass the intricacies of the time and place they originate from. The myths that are still known today are the ones that can still be applied to modern day, Oludumaré still represents what a good leader should be like, being in control and knowing when to delegate tasks to others whilst having a good working relationship with those under him. Just as myths from other places and times also represent more than just the time and place that they originate from.

To conclude, Oludumaré is not only a religious concept but also a reflection of the changing social and political contexts that shape the Yoruba people. Oludumaré is the representation of Kingship throughout the ages and the unification of people under one common purpose, whether it be a king or a heritage. The ability for myths such as Oludumaré to adapt to the changing socio-political and geographical climates shows that myths can not be a product of a specific time and place and they are constantly evolving and changing to fit a purpose.

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