

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
**AFRICAN  
RELIGION**

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looks at the role of elders in the Yoruba tradition and more generally.

### Yoruba Tradition

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.

The importance of the complementary nature that exists between men and women is similarly reinforced by the Ogboni Society's unique gesture of placing the left (feminine) fist on top of the right (masculine) fist, with the thumbs concealed, in front of the stomach. This gesture represents both a sign of giving blessings as well as the recognition of the dominance of spiritual, sacred matters—and the primacy of the spiritual over the material.

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.

### Elder Roles

Elders are responsible for continually contemplating the good and the right. Because of their Eldership status, they are not—or should not be—driven by personal interests or individual rewards. They cannot be tempted or influenced by appeals to favoritism or personal desires. The status of Eldership places them above the needs of manipulating, of "getting over" or "what's in it for me personally?" Although male and female Elders have distinct responsibilities in traditional life, in general, as Elders, they share in the responsibility of correcting imbalances, maintaining peace, and revitalizing community life. Their singular goal was to guide and guarantee the cooperative good and collective advancement. The judgments and decisions of the Elders are always consistent with their community's cultural integrity and directed toward Truth and Justice.

Elders were and are the guardians of the culture, traditions, and history of the people. Integrity, generosity, wisdom, articulateness, subtlety, patience, tactfulness, gratefulness, and being listened to and respected by others are all qualities of an Elder. Understandably, with Eldership, one's status and value in the community rises. Although the primary work of the Elder was to advise, guide, and oversee the living in community, their fundamental value and purpose was in teaching the young what it means to be human.

The Elder knows the traditions, history, values, beliefs, and cultural laws that are inviolate. Accordingly, the experience and wisdom of the Elder is readily sought and freely shared with others. Elders are charged with the task of understanding both the material and spiritual requisites of life. In fact, to have Elders live with you, and for you to have available their daily guidance, is considered a great blessing and advantage. It is thought to be an honor to even be in the presence of an Elder. They serve as a link between the past and the present while guaranteeing that our way of life is extended into the future.

As Elders, both men and women devote themselves to the higher responsibility of utilizing the

collective spirit to guide and direct the permanent ascension of the community and to channel its vital life force (spirit). The utilization and understanding of the natural spiritual power of the community is, in fact, perceived as the "wisdom of Eldership." This is an all-consuming task. To do this, Elders are generally not involved in the survival struggles of life. They devote themselves to the full-time pursuit of wisdom—the understanding and application of the high values and traditions of the community and the spiritual meaning of being human. In effect, the Elder's "work" was and is to synthesize wisdom from long life experiences, to connect the visible (material) and invisible (spiritual) realms, and to formulate all into a legacy of the good life for future generations.

Wade W. Nobles

*See also* Ancestors; Death

#### Further Readings

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## ELEDA

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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.

*Ojiji*, the shadow, is always with the person. One does not escape the shadow, it goes everywhere the person goes, and it remains with the person throughout life on the Earth, as evidence that one is alive and not a ghost. So the *ojiji* is attached to an individual from the first time he or she appears in the world.

The last spirit of the person is the *eleda*, the guardian soul that protects and provides assistance to the person. When one thinks of the Yoruba conception of the human with the three aspects, one must see the *eleda* as that component that never dies.

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.

One of the more fascinating aspects of death and the three aspects of the person is the fact that people who die in middle age may have ghosts who live in distant places. Thus, a wife may not know that her husband is a mere ghost because he may have died in some other place and the person she actually sees is a ghost. However, when the time comes for the person to die again, he dies a second time and the *eleda* goes to heaven to the Supreme God, *Olorun*.

At this time, the person tells the Supreme Being what he did on the Earth. When the person's soul is judged and he is found good, then his soul is sent to *Orun Rere*, the Good Heaven. If a soul is guilty of theft, witchcraft, murder, or cruelty, then the person will be sent to *Orun Bubu*, the Bad Heaven. This Bad Heaven is somewhere in the forest, where there are all sorts of magical and mystical beings as well as evil spirits.

Therefore, the aim of the person is to prevent the *eleda* from going into the Bad Heaven, which may be in the damp, deep caves in the forested mountains of the region. However, the *eleda*, that is, the good soul of the person who is respected, admired, and generous, will live for many generations.

Because it is believed that the spirits of the ancestors can survive as long as they are remembered by