Solimar Otero & Toyin Falola (eds.)

The introduction to Yemoja begins with Audre Lorde’s anguished triadic cry:

    mother I need
    mother I need
    mother I need your blackness now
    as the earth needs the rain ...

Is the Africana diaspora dialogue collapsing? Together the falcon and the falconer no longer are flying. Within this fathomless diasporic gulf, which psychologically widens daily, is a black hole brimming with colliding burning stars. From time to time, historian Toyin Falola co-edits a volume with a scholar or two to examine some of the sparkling cultural gems illuminating this black hole. Co-edited with Cuban-American scholar Solimar Otero, Yemoja offers a recent Falola excavation of comparative cultural suites across the Atlantic Ocean. Is it relevant to the diaspora dialogues?

In their 2002 call to prospective contributors to the book, Otero and Falola defined their intention to produce “a volume that reflects an interest in exploring the international Yorùbá deity Yẹmọnja [sic] in her multiple manifestations. As with the Indiana University Press’s previous series on ọrìṣa traditions, including those on Ogun, Osun, and Sango, this volume seeks to unearth the multi-dimensional nature of religious work and cultural production about Yẹmọnja in Africa and the African Diaspora.” Contributions were solicited from a wide range of disciplines and a diversity of cultural practices involving Yemoja.

The final selection of essays differentiates this book substantially from the Indiana University Press series. It includes more essays on the creative aspects of the subject, with the visual arts occupying about half of the volume. Robustly engaged with traditions in the African diasporas—from South America, through the Caribbean to North America—it contains studies of cultural practices hardly conducted on continental Africa. Jemoja is the diasporic story, not the African tale.

This conclusion did not take on further significance until my recent visit to West Africa, for the DAK’ART 2014 Biennale. At Dakar, Senegal, late May 2014, Salah Hassan of Connell University organized a wonderful two-day discussion, entitled “Global Black Consciousness,” as part of the Dak’art 2014 OFF program. Eloquent scholars and artists, one after another, masterfully handled the meanings, modes, and relationships of blackness in global culture. Two shy threads
emerge, and link into a legible intellectual pattern as *Jemoja* and the subject of blackness begin to connect. And new questions begin to form.

First, does *Yemoja* resonate as “a volume that reflects an interest in exploring the international Yorùbá deity Ṭe̩mọ̀nja in her multiple manifestations” (as Otero and Falola put it in their call for papers)? This primary purpose of the book implies vested interest in exploring Africana linkages cross-continentally. Who is expressing these interests—those from the diaspora, or those from Africa? Or others? In generating these intellectual explorations of the diasporas, what tools and outcomes drive the interest?

*Yemoja*, like other books in this suite edited by Falola, explores Yoruba culture as transcending Africa and thriving, especially through various Orisă cultural practices, in the diasporas. It then repeatedly raises the question (directly or indirectly), “Who or what is Yoruba?” It is not a question of race, gender, or sexuality. Or is it? One may leave the book wanting further explorations of these complications.

During the Hassan symposium at Dakar, especially in the powerful presentation by Richard Powell of Duke University, it became clear to me that a distinctive thread of subtexts was emerging: the opacity of the falcon and the falconer. Virtually all the lecturers, including Powell, spoke under the opacity of an invisible ink carrying this subtext. Addressing Ed Love’s work, Powell made profuse allusions to African references and imageries, insisting that Love’s exploration is different from the MoMA use of Africa in European modernity. The invisible ink in Ed Love is black, as Powell reads it. But is it African? Or just blank?

As Powell showed slides during his brilliant presentation, my mind asked: Where is Africa here? Who is Africa? Does Africa Speak? Does Africa see, smell, hear, think? Those four sentences turn invisible ink about Africana cultural activities into legible dialogic texts. This thread contours rhythmically into the forms and function of *Yemoja*. The volume is structured in two parts, each containing five essays. Part 1, “Yemoja, Gender, and Sexuality,” begins with a poetic invocation written in two languages by Pedro R. Pérez-Sarduy. Subsequent chapters explore Yemayá in Afro-Cuban religions (Elizabeth Pérez and Martin Tsang), the effeminate male subject in Cuban Santería (Aisha M. Belíso-De Jesús), queer dimensions and extension of the water goddess (Otero), and the divine mother and water goddess (Allison P. Sellers).

Part 11, “Yemoja’s Aesthetics: Creative Expression in Diaspora,” opens with Micaela Díaz-Sánchez’s essay performing imagistic readings of Juana Alicia’s work, followed by Arturo Lindsay’s explicative elaborations on his installations and mixed media productions. Alan West-Duran then explores Maria Magdalena Campos Pons’s iconographic interpretations of Yemaja and Ochun, and Teresa N. Washington offers an evocatively poetic chapter on aquatic accents in