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WHERE
POWERS
LIVE

A closer look into the lives of indigenous faith worshippers in Nigeria's Yorubaland.

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

PRODUCED BY
SHOLA LAWAL
CINEMATOGRAHY
BY OMI
OGUNDIPE

SCREENING BY
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Details at
https://calendar.mit.edu/event/StarrForum_WherePowersLive



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***Where Powers Live* is set in Ibadan, an ancient city in southwest Nigeria and the largest city in Sub Saharan Africa.**

Ibadan is an important city for the Yoruba people and the worshippers of Ifa.

In pre-colonial times, this land was home to the Great Oyo Empire, A Yoruba Kingdom that spread to present day Togo.

The people practiced Ifa worship also referred to as the Yoruba religion, and worshipped the Orishas. Today, there is little left of that legacy.



Drummers at the Yemoja Festival, August 2019.

FILM SYNOPSIS

Where Powers Live follows a young Ifa priestess who is painting Yoruba religion in a new light using new age tools like social media.

The advent of colonialism and the rise of foreign religions like Islam and Christianity has caused a major dent in the numbers of people practicing indigenous African faiths like Ifa worship. Missionaries in the 1800's told locals their practices were barbaric.

That message was accepted with great fervor. Today, there are mosques and churches on almost every street in Nigeria but Ifa temples are few. People turned from their ancestral gods in droves. Now, there are fears that the Yoruba religion may soon die.

Dwindling numbers aside, Yoruba religion worshippers face significant discrimination for practicing their faith. Movies portray worshippers as old, archaic and devilish people who use black magic to destroy lives. People remove references to 'Ifa' from their family names, and replace it instead with 'Jesu', or Jesus in some instances.

The film, thus, explores what this all means for those who continue to practice Yoruba faith. The portrayal of Yoruba religion has caused many to wash their hands off it or forced others to practice in secrecy. Yet, there are those who choose to remain loud about a faith considered taboo, but is it an easy task?

An important message the film highlights is introduced by the priestess' father, the High Priest of Ifa in Ibadan, who is particularly angry at prevalent state-level discrimination. While Muslims and Christians enjoy political representation in Nigeria, traditional religion worshippers, have no say at all.



An Ifa worshipper is photographed at a religious festival, January 2018.

"BE TRUTHFUL,
BE RIGHTEOUS.
DO GOOD
AND NOT
WICKEDNESS."

A verse from the Ifa Corpus.

Background

Islam arrived in what is now northern Nigeria in the 11th and 12th centuries mainly through trade avenues.

In the 15th century, missionaries from Portugal introduced natives in the southern, coastal lands of the region to Christianity. Now, about half and half of the 200 million population practice the two religions.

Before Islam and Christianity though, the different tribes that were merged to form the country worshipped various deities. In Yorubaland, in the south west region, the Yoruba people practiced Ifa worship.

Ifa worship involves a divination system that makes use of thousands of texts (Ifa corpus) and cowry shells. The belief system acknowledges the existence of a supreme being called Orunmila and several deities who communicate with him on behalf of his devotees.

Although the religion existed thousands of years ago, it was only documented orally and has never proposed an vangelical approach to recruiting devotees. Perhaps this is why the United Nations calls Ifa an 'intangible religion'.

While Ifa worship has diminished significantly in Nigeria, the practice is popular among Africans in the diaspora. With slavery, the religion was exported to South America and the Caribbean and is now practiced widely in Cuba and Brazil. Afro-descendants often travel to Nigeria during major festivals to be initiated into the practice.

*"Why would you try me? Why would you bother?
I am Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter.
I am the Nala, sister of Naruba
Oshun, Queen Sheba, I am the mother.
Ankh on my gold chain, ice on my whole chain
I be like soul food, I am a whole mood."*

BEYONCÉ, THE GIFT



Pop icon, Beyoncé, references Oshun, one of the deities in Ifa worship, in her single "Mood 4 Eva". Image: Youtube.



Ifa priestess Omitonade Egbelade Ifawemimo stands in front of her shrine during the 2019 Yemoja Festival.



A drummer boy plays a tune at the 2019 Yemoja Festival in Ibadan.

THE CREATORS

Shola Lawal

Writer, producer and director



Shola Lawal is a freelance journalist covering social justice. She reports on women and minority rights, migration, conflict and development in West Africa and recently, in the Americas. Lawal graduated with a masters degree in journalism from the University of Lagos in 2017. Lawal is the winner of the 2019 Future Awards Prize for Journalism and is the 2019 IWMF Elizabeth Neuffer Fellow.

Omowunmi Ogundipe
Videographer

Omowunmi Ogundipe is a Lagos-based cinematographer who has worked with several high-profile clients creating impactful films and documentaries.





Efunleye, an Ifa worshipper and shrine keeper pictured in Ibadan.

Director's Notes

I first thought of making this film when I encountered a fascinating character on Twitter. A young lady loudly and unapologetically advocating for a practice that has been so demonized, that what most I knew of it then, was it must be feared.

I proceeded to make this short film over several months. I am usually a speedy worker, but this is my first independent film and nothing prepared me for the amount of physical and mental work that was needed at the same time I would be juggling with life as a journalist who spends most of her time in the field.

Filmmaking, as they say, is a labour of love. I understood that phrase with the firsthand experience of frustration that I experienced in the course of creating this work.

I wanted to shut the project down several times. The film just wasn't perfect, in my opinion. I didn't have enough time, enough footage, enough interviews. But I'd prematurely put out a trailer and now had people asking periodically when my film was coming out. I was trapped. It was sink or swim.

I also got backlash for initially titling the film 'Where Gods Live.' It happens that the concept of 'gods' does not exist in Ifa worship, only 'deities'. Despite all my research, all the interviews, I still didn't know enough.

But it dawned on me that the sole reason I made this film in the first place was to deliver a message, a message bigger than me or my ego. A message on the need to humanize people that we've come to think of as 'others'. A message on the need to accept that there is no one way to do anything, and to accept and understand those we think are different from us. I didn't need to be an expert to deliver that message.

There's plenty to learn, I know now and we must dedicate our lives to educating each other and growing. It is important that we open ourselves up to the peoples and practices around us. To know that, at the core, what unites us is so much more than that which divides us.



A market scene in Ibadan.

Resources

New advocates for the ancient gods of Nigeria

- Retrieved from *Mail and Guardian*

My life as a Millennial Yoruba Priestess

- Retrieved from *BBC Outlook*

Dawn of Thunder (Sango, deity of thunder)

- Youtube. Produced by *Komotion Studios*

The spirituality of Africa

- Retrieved from *Harvard Gazette*

**African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and
Expressions**

- Available on *Goodreads*

