

Cutting-Edge Technology for an Ancient Religion

GRS student develops app to connect Yoruba faithful and their gods

ONAJE WOODBINE WEARS the loose-fitting robe of a Yoruba priest—his gold-tinged, that worn by his wife, Folasade, blue and black. Wooden figures of deities are arranged on the floor. Onaje explains how, in the ancient African religion Yoruba, a priest tosses a divination chain strung with eight seeds the size of walnuts. The priest then studies the arrangement of the seeds on the ground (there are 256 possible configurations) and recites verses of the wisdom of the orishas, or divinities, that the arrangement calls for.

WEB EXTRA

Watch a video of the Yoruba Ifa divination process, and how the new app can be used in divination training, at bu.edu/bostonia.

At least, that is the way it has been done for centuries. Now, thanks to Woodbine (GRS'12), a PhD candidate in religious studies, all it takes is an iPhone. Woodbine has developed an app for iPhones, iPods, and iPads that mimics the throwing of the chain. Intended for educational purposes rather than to replace the sacred chain, the app shows one of the 256 signatures whenever the device is shaken. It also stores the verses or stories associated with

each signature, and there are many—at least four verses per signature, meaning priests must memorize at least 1,000 verses in this oral-tradition religion.

It is up to the client seeking guidance to choose which verse or story recited by the priest applies to his problem. At the outset of a divination, the client doesn't even share his question with the priest, who merely mediates between human and deity.

The Yoruba religion originated with the Nigerian ethnic



NEW APP Onaje Woodbine, with his wife, Folasade, believes his app will broaden access to the Yoruba religion's sacred verses.

group of the same name, whose members also live in Benin, Togo, and Sierra Leone. The slave trade transplanted the Yoruba and their religion globally; while estimates place the faithful at one million, Stephen Prothero, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of religion, suggests a number in the eight figures is more likely. The Yoruba religion's animating premise is that humans forget the destiny they choose for themselves before birth, requiring that we consult the orishas with our questions about career, relationships, unhappiness, or anything else.

Woodbine's app is available on iTunes. A full version sells for \$5.99; a limited one, minus some verses and divination techniques, is free. (The Woodbines are devotees of Ifa, the major divining technique.)

Who exactly does Woodbine think will buy the app?

"It's not clear how many Yoruba religious practitioners will have access" to the necessary technology for viewing the app, concedes Woodbine, who also has a website, ifadivination.wordpress.com, devoted to the Yoruba religion. But the app can only broaden access to the religion's sacred verses, he says, because some practitioners do indeed have the latest technology, and because until now, they have had "to rely upon itinerant Yoruba priests from Nigeria to learn more Yoruba sacred texts and the art of divination. Or they had to search for verses in several rare or expensive books."

RICH BARLOW



In the ancient African religion Yoruba, a priest tosses a divination chain strung with eight seeds the size of walnuts.

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