

Harmonia Rosales, *Chronicles of Ori: An African Epic*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2025. 9781324111122, 300 pp.)

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Harmonia Rosales is a world-renowned artist who uses her Afro-Cuban roots as the basis of inspiration for her baroque style paintings. Capturing the divine likenesses of the Orisha (Yoruba deities that originate in Nigeria but have traveled across the Black Atlantic) on canvas inspired Rosales to write an accompanying story to contextualize the paintings and the rich mythologies of Orishas that inspired them. What emerged is her first book, *Chronicles of Ori: An African Epic*, that features 28 paintings woven throughout a cohesive narrative that details the rise and fall of Orishas and the exploits of the humans that worship them. Consequently, book straddles the line between fiction and non-fiction as it grapples with the complexities of Yoruba cosmology, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the threat it posed to the worship of Orisha due to its accompanying cultural and religious persecution. And while Rosales uses creative license to keep the narrative cohesive, she stays true to the allegorical natures of *patakis* on which the broader story is based. It seems that *Chronicles of Ori* is more accurately described as a book that is based on oral “mythhistories,” to borrow from Keith McNeal, rather than fiction in the truest sense of that word.

Chronicles of Ori is separated into ten books that detail Yoruba cosmological understandings of the advent of creation of the cosmos, primordial Orisha, Earth, and human beings, the interactions between Orisha and their implications for humans and the other creatures inhabiting earth, human conflict and conquest, and finally, with Orishas’ quest to remain relevant in the lives of the humans that worship them. Rosales takes special care to work through not only the origins of Orisha, but the special care that worshippers took in the New World to hold fast to their traditions in the face of untold adversity. Rosales’ approach to syncretism with Catholicism is especially nuanced, since she approaches it both from the perspective of practitioners as well as the perspective of the Orisha themselves. On this she writes, “though their visages were cloaked beneath these new guises, the Orishas’ ashé endured. The people of Orirun, adrift upon the West Lands, made a sacred vow to their guardians. They recognized that, while they might have taken new forms, their intrinsic and immutable ashé would persevere” (254). This is a beautiful way to describe the strong tradition of Santería and Lucumí in Cuba that developed in the cabildos during and after enslavement,

as well as many of the contemporary organizations that do the important work of preserving Yoruba cultural history.

Although *Chronicles of Ori* is a beautiful tribute to the Orisha traditions, the book does have some challenges. As Rosales writes herself “the oral patakis—the ancient stories of the Orishas—were not designed to be woven into a cohesive, overarching tale. Instead, each story stands as an individual lesson in morality” (283). Rosales makes two critical decisions in service of making this narrative linear, focusing on the Orisha which are most well-known in the Black Atlantic, and creating new characters, namely Eve, a West-African woman whose destiny it is to endure the Middle Passage to carry the sacred knowledge of Orisha to the New World so that their traditions might survive. Still the complex non-linear nature makes writing a cohesive narrative a herculean task, which is apparent in the arc of the story in places where the plot lines become convoluted. I would assert further that the patakis upon which *Chronicles of Ori* is based are intrinsically linked with the *odù* (divination verses) that they emerge from, and that their didactic elements are deeply tied to the larger context in the divination verse which guides more than just morality. References to these *odù* are completely absent in the narrative, even just as context to Orisha Orunmila’s prophecies, which are foundational in the story. Balancing the myth, history, and philosophy of Orisha is a challenge for all literary projects that feature Yoruba-centered folklore, and *Chronicles of Ori* contends with this challenge as well. Thusly, the narrative might have been better served by a non-linear structure or distinct vignettes.

Despite its narrative gaps, *Chronicles of Ori*, is an important addition to the body of work dedicated to the study and preservation of Black Atlantic religious traditions. Although it is not an academic text, it does do the significant work of destigmatizing African diasporic ways of knowing and humanizing the enslaved Africans that held fast to their belief systems so they might survive. Harmonia Rosales’ reverence for Orisha traditions is well-demonstrated in the care and detail in her paintings. Anyone interested in fine art would benefit from studying Rosales’ techniques in layering colors for achieving dynamic Black complexions. Anyone interested in Black Atlantic Religious traditions would be well-served by studying both the paintings and the narrative as a primer to understand the patakis that inform the roles Orishas play in Yoruba cosmology, as well as how their virtues and failings are instructive to the humans worship them. Finally, anyone interested in the representation of Orisha at the intersection of art, religion, and politics will find Harmonia Rosales’ debut book extremely valuable.