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Ogun, a Possible Ancestor of John Henry, the Steel-driving Man?

Although exact dates for the beginnings of worship of Ogun are unavailable, Sandra Barnes believes that “[...] many of the themes surrounding Ogun are rooted in a set of Pan-African ideas that probably accompanies the spread of iron-making technology throughout sub-Saharan Africa as far back as 2,000 years” (“The Many Faces of Ogun” 4). She tells us: “Clearly the god Ogun existed, [...] before the 1700s in the West African societies whose peoples contributed to the slave diaspora, or he could not have as emerged as strongly as he did in Haiti and elsewhere in the new world.” (5) She further states that: “Ogun was one of many deities carried to the New World by Africans during the slave diaspora which took place between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries (1). It is my impression that the worship of Ogun was an integral part of the culture in West Africa and that some significant memories and aspects of Ogun worship survived in the New World.

When hunting is added as a major aspect of Ogun, as it is by researcher Robert Armstrong, the origins of Ogun may exceed 2000 years. He places the roots of Ogun worship at the time of the earliest agricultural civilizations when hunters, and the peoples they helped to feed, depended upon the blessings of the divine. Armstrong states: “As a deity, Ogun (and his cult, which is very male-oriented) was traditionally especially concerned with the smelting and forging of iron, with war, and with hunting” (“The

Etymology of the Word 'Ogun'" 29). Armstrong particularly discusses the marginality of hunters and their sufferings from fatigue, loneliness, and hunger, and he further notes that they are the founders of new settlements. He also states: "[m]uch of this pattern underlies the Yoruba Ogun cult and can be counted as additional psychological preparation for the latter day transformation of Ogun into the god of vehicles and long-distance transportation" (35). Barnes also comments on the adaptability of Ogun who she claims has "an uncanny ability to stay abreast of the times" and "today incorporates anything involving metal, danger, or transportation" ("Many Faces" 2). According to Daniel Cosentino, "Ogun is the roadmaker" ("Repossession: Ogun in Folklore and Literature" 294). In their article, "Ogun, the Empire Builder", Sandra Barnes and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos state: "Ogun was responsible for society's most important innovations. He is 'the opener of roads' and brings '[...] a new way of life through the founding of towns and cities' (57).

So how does the story and ballad of John Henry reflect these enduring as well as ever changing qualities of Ogun? Information about Ogun and the history and culture of West Africa is new to me, and I make my observations as one with a beginner's mind. My comparisons of the Afro-American folk hero, John Henry to the religious traditions based on Ogun are based upon a speculation. It seems to me that John Henry, who, hammer in hand, used to drive steel spikes into rock in order that locomotives could transport people and goods to new frontiers bears some similarity to Ogun, the Yoruban god of iron and steel, road builder and founder of new territories. As Barnes says: "Ogun is the metaphorical representation of a transformation brought about by human effort" ("Many Faces" 17).

How can we know if knowledge of Ogun traditions and rituals remained in the memories and souls of recently freed slaves in West Virginia in the 1870s where and when it is believed the John Henry legend and songs began? In the preface to *Afro-American Folktales; Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*, Roger Abrahams says: “The tale-telling traditions of blacks in the New World came, directly or indirectly, from the places where the slaves’ ancestors lived in the sub-Saharan area of the Old World.” (xx). He also reminds us that:

[...]their reinterpretation in the light of the New World social situation is important to bear in mind, for it is both the continuities and the changes that occur in these stories as they are transmitted that allow us to regard them as useful devices for understanding the dynamic of the life of Afro-Americans in this alien environment (15).

The possibility is great that powerful aspects of the god Ogun, as well as derivatives of the rituals used for worship in sub-Saharan West Africa, existed during the days of John Henry.

My familiarity with John Henry comes most recently from a video my ten year old son and I like to watch, *Tall Tale: The Unbelievable Adventures of Pecos Bill*. Along with Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan and Calamity Jane, John Henry lends his strength and legend to a plot that enables a young boy to protect his family as he comes of age. While I am not able to speak with any authority about the validity of the other legends, research does indicate that John Henry lived. Guy B. Johnson in *John Henry; Tracking Down a Negro Legend* written in 1929 believes that “[...]there was a Negro steel driver named John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel, that (2) he competed with a steam drill[...] and (3) he probably died soon after the contest” (54). The authors of a recently developed web site on John Henry believe that: “John Henry was born a slave in the 1840s or 1850s in North

Carolina or Virginia [...] and was hired as a steel driver for the C&O Railroad” (*John Henry-The Project*). Steel drivers, also called hammer men, whose task it was to make holes in the rock by means of swinging heavy hammers which drove in steel spikes, cut through the mountain creating The Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia. “With his hammer and his determination to prove his superiority over a machine, he made a name for himself in folk history. His superstrength, his grit, his endurance, and his martyrdom appeal to something fundamental in the heart of the common man” (Johnson, Guy B. *John Henry*142).

Johnson believed that John Henry “epitomizes the tragedy of man versus machine” (142). If we reconsider this struggle through the lens of Ogun, might the legend of John Henry represent the losses and gains for the newly freed male African American workers whose labor established new frontiers? He is consistently depicted as a large man with strapping strength and warrior like courage as he competes against the “machine” of the white establishment in the post civil war United States. The authors of *John Henry-The Project* believe that “John Henry’s life was about power- the individual, raw strength that no system could take from a man- and about weakness- the societal position in which he was thrust”.

In an early version of the ballad, “John Henry, Steel Driving Man”, the following lyrics tell us: “John Henry said to his captain: /‘You are nothing but a common man,/ Before that steam drill shall beat me down,/ I’ll die with my hammer in my hand.’” (*John Henry-The Project*) Richard Dorson compares it to other ballads with “overtones of social protest” (*American Folklore* 182). He suggests that: “John Henry successfully pitted his massive strength with only a hammer and his bare hands against the white

man's steam drill" (182). In the refrain: " This old hammer killed John Henry/ But it won't kill me, it won't kill me", some researchers sense the undercurrent of a protest of harsh and unsafe work conditions (*John Henry-The Project*).

John Henry succeeded in beating the machine. He fought the battle, and in many versions of the ballad, won before dying. The following lyrics appear in a variation sung or chanted by construction crews: " (Stanza 17) John Henry, O, John Henry!/ Blood am runnin' red!/ Falls right down with his hammah to th' groun'./ Says, 'I've beat him to th' bottom but I'm dead,--/ Lawd,-- Lawd,--/ I've beat him to th' bottom but I'm dead'" (*John Henry-The Project*). Prisoners in the Ohio State Penitentiary recall a version containing this stanza: "The steam drill started at half past six,/ John Henry started the same time./ John Henry stuck bottom at half past eight,/ and the steam drill didn't bottom till nine,/ Oh, the steam drill didn't bottom till nine" (*John Henry-The Project*).

The ballads, several of which I first heard in childhood, are probably the most familiar forms of the legend. Guy Johnson has documented an extensive collection of work songs, hammer songs and ballads about John Henry that have been sung and chanted by laborers since the 1870s (84). Available recordings of the ballad display the talents of Woody Guthrie, Johnny Cash, and Leadbelly, as well as the prisoners of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (*John Henry-The Project*). Like the hunters of early history who opened new roads, laborers, especially prison laborers, worked on many roads and highways in 20th century America. Following the thread which winds its way back to Ogun, the ballad of John Henry is the song of the marginal man; the traveling bard, the laborer and even the prisoner.

In a particularly interesting stanza from an early version of the ballad, John Henry asks for water as he is dying:

9. John Henry was lying on his deathbed,/ He turned over on his side,/ and these were the last words John Henry said/ 'Bring me a cool drink of water before I die'
10. John Henry had a little woman,/ Her name was Pollie Ann,/ He hugged and kissed her just before he died,/ saying, 'Pollie do the very best you can.' (*John Henry-The Project*).

One may wonder about this particular last request in the final moments of life. Why does the request for water precede his tender good bye to his wife, Pollie Ann? I believe that this possibly represents a residual of the ritual washing of Ogun. John Henry cleanses himself after battle, so to speak. In his article about the etymology of the word 'Ogun', Robert Armstrong tells us: "A Yoruba authority, Pa Adeniji, reports that water for quenching iron is similarly used in Yorubaland to 'wash Ogun' [...]. The washing strengthens the hunter or warrior and protects him from the spirits of the animals or enemies he has killed" (34). Reflective of the status and adversities facing African-American laborers, however, John Henry's protection proved to be inadequate. As Sandra Barnes says: "Ogun is destroyer and creator. For instance, as a blacksmith, Ogun creates the tools and weapons that, when put to use by some occupational groups, increase productivity, but that also, when put to use by others, destroy the innocent" ("Many Faces"17).

Sandra Barnes refers to Ogun as a "root metaphor" that has traveled successfully cross-culturally, as well as withstanding the test of the Western notions of time. She says: "This is why a root metaphor such as Ogun has the power to operate cross-culturally.[...]the metaphor is the package that makes a domain of ideas dynamic, and that allows the ideas to expand, spread, and change over time" ("Many Faces" 20). I

believe that the longevity and strength of the John Henry legend is an example of Ogun's durability. Recently freed slaves in the 1870s who started singing ballads of praise and lament about John Henry might also have been paying their respects to the god Ogun who had accompanied them from afar, sharing in their fate, as well as in their future. Maybe it is the influence of my southern heritage, but I feel that John Henry is related to Ogun.

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