CALLIOPE is pronounced Kuh LIE o pee. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, Calliope was the Muse of epic poetry and eloquence. The ancients honored the Muses as the goddesses of the arts and sciences.

Consulting Editor

Dr. Wande Abimbola was born in Oyo, Nigeria, in 1932. He was consecrated as a babaláwo (Ifá priest) in 1971 and installed as Àwóṣe Ágbáye (spokesperson of Ifá priests in the world) in 1981. Abimbola has a B.A. in History from the University of London, a M.A. in Linguistics from Northwestern University, and a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Lagos. He has taught at many colleges and universities, including the University of Lagos, the University of Ilé-Ife, Indiana University, Amherst College, and Harvard University. He is currently a professor at Boston University. From 1982 to 1989, Abimbola was the President of the University of Ilé-Ife and, from 1992 to 1993, he was the Senate Majority Leader of the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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ABOUT THE COVER: The sculptors of ancient Ifé created works of art that include this magnificent "bronze" head. (©The British Museum)
Twenty to twenty-five million speakers of the Yoruba language live in southwestern Nigeria, the neighboring People’s Republic of Benin, and Togo. In the 1700s and 1800s, their ancestors lived in dozens of highly urbanized kingdoms and republics, where they spoke Ijebu, Ekiti, Ondo, Oyo, Egba, and other language varieties that are now called “dialects,” or sub-languages, of Yoruba. These dialects, however, have many words and
sentence structures in common. Like most
African languages, all are tonal. This means that
if you change the *tune* of a word, you might also
change its meaning. For example, *ọkọ* means
"husband," whereas *ọkó* means "hoe," and *ọkọ*
means "vehicle."

The ancestors of the modern Yoruba did not
always call themselves by this name or consider
themselves one single people. Yet they had much
in common culturally. For centuries, most have
deities. These are made of stone, wood, metal, and pottery. Fruit, animals, and objects of beauty are consecrated to the gods at their altars. The greatest offering, however, is the trance. During special ceremonies, the drums call down the gods, who are said to “ride” their worshipers like horses. They take over the priest’s body, so that every word, dance, and gesture of the priest is attributed to the deity. For the moments or hours of the trance, the visible body is no longer a mere person. It is the earthly manifestation of a god: it is the god.

The Yoruba are also famous for their literary tradition, especially their oral poetry. For example, in Nigeria, the divinity of lightning and fire, Sango, is “called” with the chant:

One who uses fire to fight,
One who shows off with fire...

In the present world, it is only in the warmth of the smoke that we feel [Sango’s worldly form pales before the heavenly one].

I do your bidding today, deity from the beginning of the world;
Do my own bidding for me...

Yoruba oral literature is rich in proverbs that reflect its people’s value system, such as, “We know which people we love, but we don’t know who loves us.” The elders are thought to possess the wisdom to use the proverbs wisely. Therefore, if a younger person wishes to speak a proverb in the presence of an elder, she or he must first ask the elder’s permission.

Like English, Yoruba brings together words from diverse languages and cultures, and it has produced a rich written literature. In the 1800s, the British Royal Navy rescued many kidnapped West Africans and resettled them in Freetown, the present-day capital of Sierra Leone. A large number of them came from the region now called “Yorubaland.” In Freetown, many of those rescued went to school and became prominent physicians, government administrators, business people, and Christian missionaries. Former captives developed a language that blended elements of the speech of the Yorùbá of the Ògbá, and of those captives who had returned to West Africa from captivity in the Americas. This rich new hybrid language and its writing system came to be known as “standard Yorùbá,” and now all Yoruba children are expected to learn it in school, even if they do not speak it at home.

Thus, Yoruba civilization produced and was produced by the interaction of people from multiple continents and has been enriched by their diverse experiences. Today there are tens of thousands of doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers, architects, and artists who trace their roots to Yorubaland. Many of these people are now our neighbors in Washington, D.C., New York City, Boston, London, Berlin, and Rome.

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The Yoruba are very respectful of their elders and leaders. Here, at a festival honoring the chiefs, senior chiefs prostrate themselves before the oba.