

On Common Ground: World Religions in America Introduction to Afro-Caribbean Traditions

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From Africa to America

Most of the Africans bound for the plantations, mines, and workshops of the New World embarked on their involuntary journey from the coast of western Africa that runs between present-day Senegal and Angola. Among the approximately ten million who reached the Americas, there were a few Christians and many more Muslims. But the vast majority observed traditional African religions, carrying their complex legacy to the New World. Today that legacy is part of the religious landscape of the United States. Though always subtly visible in the Christianity of black North Americans, it is vibrantly apparent in the religious traditions that were brought to the United States by Caribbean immigrants in the late twentieth century, including Cuban "Santeria," Haitian Vodou, Jamaican Revivalism and Rastafarianism. The presence of these Afro-Caribbean traditions in the U.S. has contributed to new forms of African-influenced religious life among African-Americans.

The African religious traditions that came to the Americas with the African captives share a range of qualities. All acknowledge a supreme God, sometimes described as a "high God," but emphasize the primacy of multiple spirit beings, called "orisha" in Yoruba, in daily life. In reciprocal relationships with these gods, people enjoy successes, celebrate rites of passage, and cope with misfortune, illness, and grief. Like many present-day African traditions, these streams of faith and practice involve sacred dance and percussive music, used to induce immediate contact between worshippers and spirits in the form of what social scientists call "spirit possession." The devotees are often called the "wives" or "horses" of the gods, and the gods, in turn, are believed to control and care for them. Worshippers in many such traditions make both food offerings and blood sacrifices to the spirits during celebratory feasting, cleansing, or healing rites.

Materials originally published by Columbia University Press in the CD-ROM *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*.

Distinctly African traditions made their most obvious contribution to Caribbean and South American religions--Candomble, Shango and Umbanda in Brazil, "Santeria" in Cuba, Shango in Trinidad, Obeah and Myalism in Jamaica, and Vodou in Haiti--while they were transformed into less recognizable forms in the United States. Scholars of African-American history, noting that presumably similar traditions appear to have endured only in cultural fragments until they were re-introduced via the Caribbean, have asked what distinguishes the Caribbean and South American countries from the United States.

First, experts observe that Haiti, Brazil and nineteenth-century Cuba had a much higher ratio of African to European inhabitants. Further, both Cuba and Brazil received sizable numbers of enslaved Africans until far later than did the United States, allowing the continual reinforcement of African forms of knowledge and ritual life. Second, these were Roman Catholic countries where the rich iconography and mythology of the Catholic saints provided convenient symbols through which to honor Yoruba, Fon and Kongo gods, each with his or her own distinctive emblems and traits. As they continued to develop in the Americas, most of the African-inspired traditions incorporated Christian forms, particularly Catholic statues, lithographs, candles, and stories. For example, the Yoruba or Lucumi tradition is sometimes called "Santeria," the "way of the saints," for the identification made between Yoruba orisha and the saints that are so popular in Cuban Catholicism.

Caribbean immigration to the United States since the late 1950s has established a whole new range of African-inspired religions that have then reshaped the pan-Africanist impulse among native-born black Americans. Some have joined these Afro-Caribbean traditions, while others borrow practices from them as part of their quest to re-establish a connection with Africa.

However, there was a movement among black Americans to reclaim their American roots decades before this new infusion of Afro-Caribbean culture and religion. Despite its distance from the West African source of the slave trade, the biblical "Ethiopia" became, for African-American Christians, a beacon of hope as a source of black dignity. A political pan-Africanist vision reached its crescendo in the 1920's with the "back to Africa" movement of Marcus Garvey. Led by Garvey, the United Negro Improvement Association--the greatest mass organization in African-American history--embraced no single denomination, but declared missionizing and building the African homeland to be the responsibility of all African-American Christians. Garvey's redemptive pan-Africanism finds prominent successors not only in secular African-American fashion and politics, but in religious movements like the Nation of Islam.

For many African-American Christians and Muslims, identification with Africa implied no identity with the non-scriptural religious traditions of Africa. Until recently, most African-American Christians consciously downplayed their cultural and hereditary connections to Africa. However, the work of scholars such as historian Carter G. Woodson, sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits has deepened the understanding of Africa's contribution to African-American culture and

progress. Herskovits in particular argued that American culture, while not preserving distinctive Caribbean religious traditions, was nonetheless replete with "Africanisms," or African survivals. Among these are the many forms of dance, movement, music, and the experience of being "filled with the Holy Spirit," that the Black church has contributed to American Protestantism in general and Pentecostalism in particular. Another example is the continual presence of certain magical and healing practices in the South, called "Hoodoo," "Voodoo," and "Conjure." Subsequent research presented the "ring shout," most pronounced among the Gullah of the Georgia Sea Islands, as further evidence of the African connection.

Today, Americans identify with distinctively African culture and religion in many ways. Among African Americans in the United States, there is new consciousness of the contributions their forebears have made to the shaping of American culture, expressed in new forms of African-American celebration such as the nine-day Kwanzaa festival held in December. Americans from the Caribbean bring with them the heritage of Catholicism as well as Afro-Caribbean traditions associated with Haiti, Cuba or Jamaica. In addition, new immigrants from Africa's many countries--including Ethiopia's Coptic Christians, Nigeria's Pentecostals, and Ghana's Anglicans--have brought Christian traditions shaped by their own African cultures. These very different streams of tradition and culture, all linked to Africa, are now present in America.

"Santeria," The Lucumi Way

Of all the New World societies, Cuba received captives from the greatest mix of African origins. They came from all parts of the coast and interior of western Africa, their numbers dwarfing all reliable estimates of the number of captives brought to the entire United States. Between 500,000 and 700,000 Africans reached Cuba, the majority arriving in the nineteenth century. The size, diversity, and continual replenishment of this population allowed a rich array of African-inspired religions to flourish there, even beyond the end of the slave trade.

The gods of West Africa are called orisha in Yoruba, oricha in Spanish. Yoruba people also speak of a supreme being, Olorun or Olodumare, whose power or life-energy, called ashe, becomes manifest through both ancestral spirits and the orisha. In Cuba, as in Haiti, West African gods became paired with Roman Catholic saints in syncretistic relationships. In Cuba, the ruler of lightning, called Shango in Yoruba and Chango in Spanish, is identified with St. Barbara. Ogun, the lord of iron and technology, is identified with St. George, Babalu Aye is identified with St. Lazarus, and Yemaya, goddess of the sea, with Our Lady of Regla, the patroness of a Havana suburb.

It has long been common to call Cuban oricha-worship "Santeria" because of the identification of the orichas with the saints. However the term is now being rejected by those who think it overemphasizes the Catholic and syncretistic elements. Increasingly, many within the Afro-Caribbean tradition prefer to call it La Regla Lucumi, "the order of Lucumi," or La Regla de Ocha, "the order of the orichas." The term Lucumi is said to derive from a Yoruba greeting meaning, "my friend."

In the past few decades, Santeria, or La Regla Lucumi, has come to the United States with Cuban immigrants: in New York, for instance, some believe the Statue of Liberty embodies the presence of Yemaya. Botanicas selling the religious articles, herbs, candles, and images of the tradition proliferate in Miami, Seattle, and New York. It is estimated that between 250,000 and one million practice Santeria in the United States. However there is no visible infrastructure, and most practitioners, if asked, would publicly identify themselves as Catholic.

The practice of Santeria is organized in "houses"--loose communities of initiates and aspirants led by a particular priest, (a "babalocha") or a priestess, (an "iyalocha"). Most members of the house have been initiated by him or her and are therefore called his or her "godchildren." During initiation, called the asiento, or "seating" of the god in the devotee's head, the godparent and his or her team shave the initiate's head and make small incisions, planting sacred and secret substances in them that will link the god permanently to the new initiate and strengthen the god's protection. The initiate is then possessed temporarily by the god, an event that will recur on certain ritual occasions throughout the initiate's life.

New initiates are called "brides of the god" in the Yoruba-influenced Lucumi language, having made a lifelong commitment to a god who becomes central to the devotee's life and consciousness. The devotee from the time of initiation is committed to offering regular sacrifice to the god ruling his or her head. After a year of ritual seclusion, the new initiate becomes a "santero" or "santera," and in time, may initiate his or her own "godchildren."

Some male priests are initiated not to undergo possession, but to conduct divination, or to discern hidden realities by means of an oracle. These highly prestigious diviners, or "babalaos," work with individuals and families, casting and reading cowry shells or a sacred chain to determine the spiritual causes of personal problems. The priest may recommend such solutions as "cleansing" fumigations and herb baths or investiture with protective bead necklaces representing the oricha gods. The babalao also plays a critical role in many initiation ceremonies.

On the altars of devotees, the oricha are often represented by stones--embodiments of the divine power--placed alongside other sacred emblems inside lidded calabash gourds, bowls, tureens, or jars. Each oricha also has his or her own foods, characteristic myths, numbers, colors, dances, and drum rhythms. At a sacred dance festival held in Miami, for instance, Cubans easily recognize each manifest oricha by means of his or her movements.

On the annual anniversary of a santero/a's initiation, a sacrifice is made to the particular oricha who possessed the devotee during his or her initiation. There are other annual festivities in the "house" of Santeria, including the cycle of "tambores," each one honoring a different oricha. Many of these tambores roughly coincide with the Roman Catholic saints' days--again reflecting the symbiotic relationship between Lucumi and

Christian traditions. In America, the Santeria tradition has developed through these house communities, which are not ordinarily public places of worship.

Although there are large Cuban immigrant communities, the public profile of Santeria has remained very low, in part because of hostility and misunderstanding on the part of the dominant culture. Though animal sacrifice is but one part of the ceremonies of healing and of devotional feasting, it is the aspect most noted by the general public. Conflict over this issue became public in Hialeah, Florida, when the city passed legislation to ban animal sacrifice. The city claimed the legislation was religiously "neutral," but the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye in Hialeah maintained that the legislation was aimed specifically at Santeria practices. Ernesto Pichardo, the priest of the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, took his case to the courts. Eventually, the Supreme Court determined that Hialeah had overstepped the bounds of the law by directing such restrictions at the practices of the Santeria religion.

Vodou, Serving the Spirits

The term "Vodou" derives from a word meaning "spirit" or "god" in the Fon and Ewe languages of West Africa. It has come to be used as the name for the religious traditions of Haiti, which blend Fon, Kongo, and Yoruba African religions with French Catholicism. However, while Haitians themselves speak more often of "serving the spirits," today they also use the term "Vodou." Since the late 1950s, with the Haitian immigrant and refugee population increasing in the United States, these traditions of "serving the spirits" have become part of the American religious landscape.

By the late 18th century, the Caribbean island of St. Domingue, or Hispaniola, of which Haiti occupies the western third, had already received considerably more African captives than Cuba or the United States would receive throughout their participation in the slave trade. Nearly half of the laborers who worked the island's sugar plantations came from West and Central Africa. After the Haitian revolution made Haiti an independent nation in 1804, the influx of African slaves was cut off, but the large Haitian citizenry of African descent continued to develop elaborate African-inspired traditions.

The Vodou gods or spirits, called "lwa," are grouped into several "nations," linked to areas and peoples in Africa. Vodou temples in Haiti, and some in North America, are marked by a sacred center pole. Intricate corn-meal drawings called "veve" are traced on the ground around the pole to summon individual spirits. On an altar, gifts of food and drink are presented. Singing, drumming, and dance invoke particular spirits to become manifest in one of the devotees. The spirit is said to "mount" and "ride" a devotee as one might ride a horse. The movements, the voice, and the words of one so possessed are understood to be those of the spirit. In this way, the lwa communicate with human beings.

In Haiti, a symbiotic syncretism of the gods with Catholic saints began to take place, possibly one way in which slaves, who were expected to be baptized in the Roman Catholic church, maintained their own religious traditions under the veneer of Catholicism. As Karen McCarthy Brown, scholar of Vodou in both Haiti and the U.S.,

points out, however, expanding the visual and ritual vocabulary of Vodou through Catholicism was also a natural evolution of African religious syncretism. Dambala of the Fon people, for example, has come to be served as St. Patrick, while Ogou is served as St. James and Ezili Danto as Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. In present day urban Haiti and urban North America, the ritual calendar of Vodou is closely associated with the yearly cycle of the Catholic saints' feast days.

Vodou practitioners are dispersed throughout the United States, with disproportionate numbers in New York, Florida, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. Though their exact number is difficult to determine, it has been estimated that there are over 450,000 practitioners in greater New York City alone. For many a Haitian oungan (priest) or manbo (priestess), it is a challenge to transplant and reconstruct the practices of Vodou in ways meaningful to life in the United States. Quite often, this means that ritual ceremonies that might have taken place in semi-public sanctuaries in Haiti are conducted in crowded homes and basements in order to insure privacy. Some practitioners, however, meet in storefronts, or rent halls in which to perform their ceremonies. Around a specially selected tree in Riverside Park, a priestess might light a series of multicolored candles to invoke the various lwa. Or Prospect Park in Brooklyn might become the Great Woods--the Gran Bwa--where rituals are performed.

The priests and priestesses of the United States have assumed the responsibility of hosting ceremonies, teaching young initiates or "godchildren" new to the religion, and conducting individual and private consultations for those in search of healing and spiritual well-being. In the United States, Haitian Vodou is also assuming new forms as non-Haitians, many of them African Americans, begin to discover the lwa.

Jamaican Religion

Over 750,000 African captives came to Jamaica from the Bight of Biafra, the region of present-day Ghana, and west Central Africa. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Jamaica saw the emergence of a variety of African and African-influenced religious traditions. The three major traditions that then reached the United States are called Obeah, Jamaican Revivalism or Pukumina, and Rastafarianism.

Obeah is a form of herbal and spiritual technology used to cure ailments and to harm one's enemies. In Jamaica, "Obeahmen" were believed capable of poisoning people and of dominating them by catching their shadows. Some researchers attribute the origins of Obeah to the Ashanti people of what is now Ghana and their practice of Obayifo. In Jamaica, these practices were a legendary component of slave resistance and revolt. In the United States today, Obeah men and women, commonly referred to as "readers" and known as skilled herbalists, are sought primarily for the healing of physical, spiritual, and mental disorders, and for protection from malevolent spiritual forces.

A Jamaican Revivalist tradition called Pukumina--more structured than Obeah in belief and practice, with numerous churches and congregations--is practiced in most major U.S. cities today. Like mainland black North American Christianity, Jamaican Revivalism is

much more likely to be described as "African" by outsiders than by insiders, though there are many parallels between Jamaican Revivalist movements and West African cultures. Various Jamaican Revivalist practices recall West African and Haitian religions. For example, each of the various spirits venerated in Revivalism is said to prefer specific foods, colors, and music. Recalling Haitian Vodou, Pukumina ceremonial space includes the "ritual architecture" of a central pole, to which Jamaicans add a basin of water used for spirit-channelling. This apparatus stands at the center of the sacred space, whether it be in the backyard or in a special meeting hall. Drumming and dancing culminate in trances and contact between the worshippers and the spirits who bring about divine healing or divine inspiration. In the Revivalist traditions, however, it is often said to be the Holy Spirit who "possesses" the devotees, or the spirits of Biblical figures such as the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Peter.

The most famous Jamaican religion is undoubtedly Rastafarianism, a complex spiritual and political movement that emerged in Jamaica during the depression years of the 1930s. It combined inspirational Jamaican folk Christianity with pan-Africanist sentiments inspired by Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association. In repudiating British colonialism, Rastafarians were inspired by Ethiopia, the one land of Africa mentioned in the Bible. Ethiopia's twentieth-century emperor Haile Selassie, "the Lion of Judah," was believed to be the 225th king of biblical Ethiopia by the Rastafarians, who took Haile Selassie's name, Ras Tafari, the "Prince of Tafari Province," as their own. Garvey's dream of a return to Africa became the Rastafarian dream as well, and some Rastafarians have indeed settled in Ethiopia, Ghana, and Zaire.

Rastafarians interpret the Old Testament as the history of the black people and as a prophetic key to understanding events in the modern world. They see themselves as successors to the biblical prophets and, like devotees of Jamaican Revivalist movements, often speak as the present-day voices of biblical prophets such as Moses, Joshua, and Isaiah. The characteristic Rastafarian hairstyle, "dreadlocks," is said to symbolize both the lion's mane and the strength of Samson. Some Rastafarians believe that African warriors wear their hair in a similar style. The sacramental use of marijuana among Rastafarians is believed to bring divine inspiration, to cure diseases, and to enhance strength.

In the United States, the rhythm of Rastafarian reggae music has become one of the best known aspects of this Jamaican religious tradition. The lyrics, like the Rastafarian lifestyle, often include a strong note of social protest as well as the dream of returning to the biblical Ethiopia. As Bob Marley sings,

*We are the children of the Rastaman.
We are the children of the Higher Man.
Africa, Unite 'cause the children wanna come home.
Africa, Unite 'cause we're moving right out of Babylon.
And we're grooving to our father's land.*

Just as Rastafarian identification with the biblical Ethiopia was a strong form of resistance to British colonial society in the 1930s, so today Rastafarian protest affirms African identity in the face of Eurocentric Jamaican and American cultures.

The Kingdom of Oyotunji

Along the road approaching Oyotunji African Village in Sheldon, South Carolina, a sign is posted in both Yoruba and English:

"You are leaving the United States. You are entering Yoruba Kingdom. In the name of His Highness King Efuntola, Peace. Welcome to the Sacred Yoruba Village of Oyo Tunji. The only Village in North America built by Priests of the Orisha Voodoo Cults as a tribute to our Ancestors. These Priests preserve the customs, laws, and religion of the African Race."

Oyotunji Village was founded by Walter Serge King in 1970 as a religious and cultural community for African-American practitioners of the West African Yoruba faith. Its name means "Oyo rises again," referring to the African Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, now rising in a new form near the South Carolina seashore.

King was first exposed to African-influenced religions through his contact with Cuban immigrants in New York City. In their practices, he recognized his own lost African heritage. Eventually he went to Cuba and underwent initiation into Santeria. After his return to the United States he formed the Yoruba Temple in Harlem in 1960. The temple, committed to preserving African traditions within an American context, was the cultural and religious forerunner of Oyotunji Village.

With the rise of black nationalism in the 1960s, King began to envision the construction of a separate African-American nation that would institutionalize and commemorate ancestral traditions. In June of 1970, he fulfilled this vision with the creation of Oyotunji African Village, where he was crowned Oba Osejeman Adefunmi I.

At times, Oyotunji Village has been home to as many as two hundred people. Today, its residential community consists of twelve African-American families, governed by the king and the community's appointed council. Each family is committed to the teachings of the Yoruba tradition, which include a religious understanding of the world as comprised primarily of the "energies" of the Supreme Being Olodumare, the orisha deities, and the ancestral spirits. This religious world is maintained spiritually through rituals, chants, music, sacrifice, and annual ceremonies.

Now more than twenty five years old, Oyotunji Village is a success in sustaining an "African cultural lifestyle" in the United States. The dedication and commitment of the founders is being passed down to the community's children. The Yoruba Academy, the annual African Heritage Camp, and the Rites of Passage Program are all part of the development of a vibrant African village on American soil.