

ORIXAS / ORISHAS - A brief introduction

During the hundreds of years of the trans-atlantic slave trade, millions of Africans from many regions, including from the Dahomey empire, Yoruba kingdoms and the Congo and Angola nations, were forcibly shipped to the 'new world' to work in the European colonies.

Africans of Yoruba descent were brought to Cuba primarily from Nigeria, and to Brazil mainly from Benin (formerly Dahomey). They brought their traditions with them, and despite harsh conditions and long periods when they were prohibited from expressing their own culture, they managed to retain many of their religious beliefs and practices, although several customs were lost. In Brazil and Cuba the Yoruba traditions have formed the basis of two new religions: Candomblé de Ketu in Brazil, and Santeria, or Regla de Ocha in Cuba.

Central to both these religions is the worship of deities known as Orixas in Brazil and Orishas or Orichas in Cuba. The deities are primarily from the Yoruba tradition, though some also come from the Ewe/Fon traditions, and they are honoured through rituals and public ceremonies, often including drumming, singing and dancing.

The Yoruba believe that the Orishas are divine beings directly connected with natural forces such as thunder, lightning, wind & rain and with activities such as hunting, or working with herbs and plants or with metals. They believe Olodumare created the universe, that all life is related and that human beings are not separate from other elements in the universe.

According to tradition each of us is born with a guiding Orisha or Orishas to whom we must make offerings including sacrifice if we are to maintain balance and harmony in our lives.

There are many stories and myths about each of the Orishas, and about their relationships with each other. Each Orisha has their own specific character, and is identified with a particular domain, symbols, colours, food, dance, drum rhythms and greeting.

Orisha worship went through many transformations in order to survive. One way the slaves found to keep their practices alive was to identify common attributes between each Orisha and a Catholic saint, so that the Orisha could be depicted as that saint. For example, in Brazil Oxossi is identified with St. George, in Cuba Chango is identified with St. Barbara and Babalu Aye (Cuba) and his Brazilian equivalent, Omolu, are both identified with St. Lazarus.

The Orishas continue to be honoured in many regions of Africa and in several countries throughout the world. In the US and in some countries in Europe, Orisha based religions are growing in popularity with an increasing number of practitioners. Santeria and Candomblé are established religions with followers from all social classes. They are complex religions that can only be touched on here but hopefully this article gives you some insight.