



## Yoruba Religion

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## Yoruba Religion

### Keywords:

Yoruba; Orisha; Afro-Atlantic Religions; Ifá; transnationalism; syncretism

### Definition

Yoruba Religion is one of the main influences in the making of Afro-Atlantic religions. Known as *Lucumís* in Cuba or *Nagôs* in Brazil, enslaved Africans coming from Yorubaland have greatly contributed to the fashioning of *Orisha* worship in Latin America. In the last thirty years, Yoruba Religion has increased its influence in countries like Brazil or Argentina, through the ritual activities of Yoruba *babalanwos* and the spread of Ifá in Latin America. Today Cuban Ifá tradition, claiming the same Yoruba origin, is also a key component of the re-Africanization process.

### Introduction

Yoruba Religion is present in Latin America since, at least, the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the slave trade, thousands of “Yoruba” have been brought to Latin America, especially Cuba and Brazil. Nevertheless, prior to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “Yoruba” was just the name given by the Hausa to their enemies in Oyo, the capital of the Yoruba Empire. The idea of a single “Yorùbá” people has been the outcome of the work of Protestant missionaries, who were often liberated captives returning to their original homes in present-day South-Western Nigeria.

Known as *Nagôs* in Brazil or *Lucumís* in Cuba, Yoruba-speakers highly contributed to the fashioning of *Orisha* religions in Latin America. Today, several African-inspired religions claim their roots in Yoruba Religion, such as Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Regla de Ocha or Santería, and Trinidadian Orisha, also known as Shangó. Trans-Atlantic journeys between Brazil and Yorubaland (Verger 1968) have increased, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an ongoing process of re-Africanization. The links between Africa and the Americas have never been completely severed even after the end of the slave trade, in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the incessant quest for African roots has shaped new ways of *Orisha* worship in Latin America.

This ongoing dialogue between African-inspired religions in the Americas and Yoruba Religion in Nigeria has contributed to the making of what Thompson (1968) called the “Black Atlantic World” and to the emergence of “Afro-Atlantic cultures” (Thornton 1992). Other authors like Matory (2005) have highlighted a “Yorùbá-Atlantic complex” that still shapes religious practices on the two shores of the Atlantic. Cultural cross-fertilization gave birth to African-inspired religions in the Americas and revitalizes today Yoruba religious practices in Nigeria.

### Religious transnationalism

The Yoruba term *òrìṣà* – *oricha* in Cuba, *orixá* in Brazil or *orisha* in Trinidad – designates the gods worshipped in Yoruba-Atlantic religions, traditionally called “saints” in Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Regla de Ocha. As in Yoruba Religion, these religions generally involve drumming, dancing and possession trance. Ancestor worship, called Egungun, is another important feature of Yoruba Religion that has been preserved in Brazil and more recently “revitalized” in other diasporic locations.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Afro-Atlantic religious space has been shaped by the circulation of specialists, religious goods, and ideas that helped reintroducing ritual practices considered as more traditional, such as the Obá of Xangô in Bahian Candomblé (Capone 2010). *Orisha* religions

in the New World were therefore reshaped within a framework of forced and free migration, as well as mutual contact and exchange. Matory (2005) has analyzed the two-way travel and commerce between Brazil and Africa, demonstrating how a class of literate and well-traveled Afro-Brazilians helped to shape Yoruba culture and Yoruba traditional religion, canonizing them as the pre-eminent classical standard of African culture in the Americas. In Brazil, going to Africa signified making contact with the source of religious knowledge and tradition, which had been broken up by slavery, rapidly becoming a source of prestige for members of Candomblé. Today, the re-Africanization process in Brazil, as well as in several locations in Latin America, has brought on new forms of religious transnationalism, in which Yoruba Religion plays a significant role.

*Orisha* religions that find their roots in Yoruba Religion are today both trans-national and pan-ethnic. Through the multiple variants of Yoruba-inspired religions in Latin America, Yoruba Religion has become a cultural tradition that must be conceptualized as the product of these transatlantic dialogues. Furthermore, in Cuba and Brazil, Yoruba-inspired religions have expanded across ethnic and national barriers. In the last decades, they evolved from secret and persecuted to become public and respectable, reaching people from different social backgrounds, as well as foreigners, who are importing these religious practices to their own countries. The spread of these religions has created networks of ritual kinship that now span national boundaries, giving rise to transnational communities of worshippers such as, for instance, the Batuque and Africanismo in Argentina and in Uruguay and the Regla de Ocha or Lucumí religion in Mexico and the United States. The proliferation of these increasingly active networks of priests and their attempts to gain recognition as a World Religion from established religious and secular institutions has become an important aspect of the whole array of *Orisha* traditions since the 1980s.

In the last years, this interconnectedness has concerned two of the most important Yoruba-inspired religions: Candomblé and Lucumí religion or Santería. Brazilians initiate Cubans living in the United States into the worship of forgotten *orishas* and into the secrets of *orí* (head) cult (Capone 2005), while Cubans and Nigerians initiate Brazilians in the secrets of Ifá. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Yorubaland is just one location among many other centers of *Orisha* tradition in Latin America that preserved sacred knowledge on Yoruba Religion.

### **Yoruba religious identity**

Yoruba-inspired religions in Latin America also posit the issue of multilayered religious identities where Africanness and Blackness are not necessarily related. Today, white initiates in Ifá, Brazilian Nagô Candomblé or in Cuban Regla de Ocha formulate what Palmié (2008) call a “self-identification as ritually reborn Yoruba.” As Butler (2001) suggests, for practitioners of African-inspired religions in the Americas, African identity became an articulation of personal choice, rather than an indicator of birthplace or genetic descent.

This mirrors the Yoruba cultural identity that, according to Kola Abimbola (2004), can be acquired by *birth*, *prescription* or *choice*. The child of a Yoruba family is a Yoruba by birth, but any initiate in a Yoruba-inspired religion is also considered a Yoruba, because s/he has “reborn” into the religion. This can be the consequence of a prescription through the divination or a matter of choice, when people from other cultural background are fascinated by the *Orisha* religion and choose to be initiated. As Bastide (1960) who, after his first consecration into Candomblé at the end of the 1950s, declared *Africanus sum*, noted: initiation produces “African” bodies disregarding their real ethnic origin. For Yoruba Religion, all

humanity has been created in Ilé-Ifé, the holy Yoruba town, and every human being who has been called by the *Orisha* is then an *Omo Oduduma*, a descendant of the Yoruba.

### **Rethinking Syncretism**

Today, transnational religious actors are committed to increase their reflexivity in order to build up cognitive bridges between distinct belief systems. The high level of religious reflexivity expressed by Cuban *babalaos* in their interaction with Candomblé practitioners in Rio de Janeiro (Capone 2011) prefigures the production of “intentional” hybrids, inevitably dialogical (Bakhtin 1981). In Yoruba-derived religions marked by multiplicity, they are the expression of multivocality within a same worldview.

Syncretism becomes therefore a native category, extremely significant in religious actors’ narratives at the core of symbolic struggle for legitimacy. Stewart and Shaw (1994) showed that contingencies of power inflect syncretic and antisyncretic processes. In this struggle for the sign, emic categories bring in the heteroglossia of multiple conceptions of syncretism. Hence, in the relentless quest for the preservation of a cultural and ritual heritage, the syncretism between “sister religions” – Candomblé, Santería, and Ifá – becomes a “good”, “positive” syncretism that opens the way to re-Africanization. In the case of Yoruba-derived religions, the “good” syncretism combines endogenous varieties, making it possible to recreate a ritual and philosophical unity that was lost in the Middle Passage, in opposition to a “bad” syncretism – the Afro-Catholic – constituted by exogenous varieties that must be resisted.

We are thus confronted to a metasyncretic reflexivity, in which the actors’ perception and their declared political projects are crucial in the understanding of how these notions “work”, out of a decontextualized celebration of hybridity. This phenomenon allows sacred realities to coalesce in a coherent network of what Hucks (2012) calls a “religious parallelism”, enhancing a sense of theological correspondence among traditions.

### **Ifá and the making of a World Religion**

This spiritual exchange and cross-fertilization between religious traditions, all claiming their origin in Yoruba Religion, has dramatically increased in the last decades, thanks to the proliferation of Ifá initiations in Latin America. Ifá, the most elaborate of African systems of divination, occupies a unique position in what is called “Yoruba Traditional Religion” (Peel 2015). The current diffusion of the priesthood of *babalawos*, the specialists of Ifá divination, in several locations in Latin America, seems to confirm the *babalawo*’s flexibility and capacity to adapt to new environments. According to Wande Abimbola (1997), the cognitive openness or “elasticity” in Yoruba Religion is a key factor in the growth of Yoruba religious diaspora, that should be devoid of segregation on the basis of color, race, and gender.

This inclusiveness of Yoruba Religion is inscribed into the sacred stories of Ifá. As the Odu Otura Meji (also known as Odu Imale), that instructs to accept and practice Islam (Peel 2015), the spread of Ifá aims to gather all the practitioners of Yoruba-inspired religions, despite of their ritual differences. Today, religious leaders of Afro-Atlantic religions -historically characterized by their extreme fragmentation and lack of a superior authority that could impose orthodox rules to its followers- aspire to unify their practices highlighting the existence of a common ground in all African-inspired religions in the Americas. Since the early 1980s, there have been various attempts to standardize the different Afro-Atlantic religious practices. The International Congresses of *Orisha* Tradition and Culture (also called *Orisa* World Congresses) have helped to create networks between the initiates of Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Regla de Ocha, Haitian

Vodun, North American Orisha-Voodoo, and Yoruba Traditional Religion. These networks between practitioners facilitate the circulation of values, symbols, and practices between different modalities of Afro-Atlantic religions, helping to build a wide-ranging “*Orisha* religion.”

### **Re-Africanization**

Since the 1980s, the Afro-Brazilian religious field has been deeply recast by the emergence of what is nowadays frequently referred to as the “re-Africanization movement.” In southeastern Brazil, this movement occurred principally via Yoruba language and divination courses as well as through ritual borrowings from other African-inspired religious traditions (Capone 2010). The desire, at the core of the re-Africanization movement, to recover the lost elements of an immemorial tradition is certainly not a new phenomenon in Candomblé. According to practitioners, fragments of this tradition have been variously preserved in Nigeria, Cuba, and Brazil. Today, the process of strengthening the roots thus involves travelling to these traditional centers of *Orisha* worship, journeys that are perceived as a temporal return to the “true” African tradition, as well as the search for re-Africanization via courses in Yoruba language and civilization. The reconstitution of this lost unity is an attempt to find a common past and a shared tradition, both of which are essential to the creation of a community of practitioners of “*Orisha* religion.”

Today some Candomblé initiates in Rio de Janeiro and in São Paulo go directly to Africa in search of this legitimacy, due to the more frequent contact with Yoruba *babalawos*; others weave ritual ties with Cuban *babalaos* (Ifá priests) who arrived in Brazil at the beginning of the 1990s. Some Candomblé cult houses in Rio de Janeiro are now under the ritual protection of *ramas* (religious lineages) of Cuban *babalaos*, the late Rafael Zamora being the most renowned. The Cuban tradition represents a diaspora model meant to be close to the African tradition, allowing new Brazilian Ifá initiates to move away from Yoruba *babalawos*, which are frequently accused of mercantilism. The re-Africanization movement therefore generates multiple visions of Yoruba religious tradition, often incompatible in a disputed religious space.

Nevertheless, the attempts to preserve “African tradition” and recover the original foundations of Yoruba Religion also stimulate reorientations that introduce exactly the change and innovation that was supposed to be erased. To “re-Africanize” in fact means to redefine the tradition, a process of both interpretation and rationalization, to make its concepts work in the present context. The emphasis on Ifá allows this corpus of mythology to function not only as a divinatory tool but also as a Sacred Book, providing a key element for obtaining the desired new status of World Religion.

Today, Yoruba Religion has become a meta-tradition that is constantly renegotiated through the multiple conversations between the Yoruba-inspired religions in the diaspora.

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Cross-references:

- Candomblé
- Xangô (Recife)
- Batuque
- Santería or Lucumí Religion
- Shangó (Trinidad)
- Orisha-Voodoo
- Ifá
- *Orisha* Religion
- Diaspora

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