Yoruba (African people)

Definition: Yoruba from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

The majority ethnic group living in southwestern Nigeria; there is a Yoruba minority in eastern Benin. They number approximately 20 million in all, and their language belongs to the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family. The Yoruba established powerful city states in the 15th century, known for their advanced culture which includes sculpture, art, and music.

Fighting between Nigeria's two largest ethnic groups, Hausas and Yorubas, in the southwest of the country broke out in July 1999, resulting in many deaths.

Summary Article: Yoruba
From Religion and Society: Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals

The Yoruba are renowned throughout West Africa and the African diaspora as masters of religious practice and a number of New World religions have their origins in Yoruba practices; among these religions are Santería, Condombole, and other Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban offshoots. Certainly, the variety of rituals, specialized gods, and types of divination place the Yoruba high on the list of those who are masters of religion.

There is much discussion over whether the Yoruba are, in fact, monotheists with the various orishas simply representing different aspects of the Supreme Being or Oludamare. In any event, religion among the Yoruba is not separated from other aspects of life. The spirits, or orishas, play an active role in daily life. This fact remains true for those Yoruba who became Christian, or Muslim for that matter. Anthropologists in both the Old and New Worlds have studied the subject of Yoruba syncretism.

Central Concepts

There are two fundamental ideas in the Yoruba religion of the orishas. These are “play” and “journey.” Yoruba play encapsulates the concepts of spontaneity and ruse. It is personified in the guise of Nala, the trickster. Spontaneity carries with it the idea of improvisation. Improvisation goes with acting on impulse and distinguishes Yoruba ritual from other West African practices.

It is not unusual for a performer to elaborate on his role during the performance of ritual. He may leave the performance area to show up in the audience, playing with people, even fondling them. Then he may hide, popping up behind people to scare them. By violating boundaries, the performer dramatizes the fact that there is no boundary between spectator and performer. Both work together to create the ritual. Play is therefore both a sacred and communal thing, created on the spot through communal collaboration.

The concept of continuous transformation is central to Yoruba ritual. There is a constant reinterpretation of the stories the rituals portray. There is continuity, however, in the midst of change, since the framework remains constant while variations are almost infinite in the manner of performance.

Central to the process of transformation is the idea of the journey. Transformations are journeys from

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one real of knowledge to a different realm of knowledge. This movement is a fundamental part of Yoruba cosmology. Life is an ontological journey in which a person seeks to gain knowledge and understanding of himself or herself. The individual seeks to understand his or her mind and body. To illustrate this we will use what Drewal calls the ontological journey; the quest for self knowledge. This is a lifelong ritual that, in essence, is focused on understanding one’s mind and body.

Rituals
The *Ikose w'aye* ("stepping into the world"), a childbirth ritual, begins the journey. An Ifa (a diety; see below) priest performs Ifa divination to find out what the child's future will be. He lays out a guide for the child to follow for best success in life.

A ritual called "knowing the head" follows when a child is three months old. It is the first step toward "understanding the head" (personality), the *ori inu*. This ritual is a step toward establishing the child's personality. The Yoruba seek to unite the male and female sides of personality, reuniting that which was originally one. There is widespread depiction of this play of gender throughout Yoruba worship, whether it be Sango (god of iron and thunder) worship, Ifa ceremonies, or cross-dressing in the Agemo Festival—a festival of reversal in which women mock men and vice versa through donning the clothes of the other. There is a constant stress on the container, the female, and the contained, the male. The need for compromise and the reintegration and uniting of the two is found throughout Yoruba ritual life.

Divination allows Yoruba people to communicate with Ifa, the deity who received from the sky god Olorun “the power to speak for the gods and communicate with human beings” (Bascom 1969, 80). The *babalawo* is the priest who is the diviner between Ifa and the people. Diviners provide parents with information to guide their children on the path of life, providing medical advice along with moral guidelines.

Death is a time of both sadness and merrymaking. Seven days after death, there is a wake and hymns are sung. There is a viewing of the body. Then there is a procession to the graveyard followed by a party. There is rejoicing in the feats of the person who died and a celebration of his or her passage into the next life.

The market is often used as a metaphor of Yoruba life and religion. It is a place of great contradiction and variety. Quarrels break out. Disputes are settled. Mediation is required. Things change from moment to moment as situations transform themselves in a kaleidoscopic fashion. Males and females seem to come together and part. Compromise and improvisation are the order of the day as one must adapt or fall behind. Play, with its twin characteristics of ruse and improvisation, is essential to survival. Life is both serious and fun, all at the same time.

From birth to death there are rituals to guide the Yoruba. The baby's ritual naming is a community event. The baby is ritually welcomed into the family through ceremonies. The baby is not given a name for seven days because names have meanings and parents and elders study the baby so its names reflect its character and behavior. Throughout life, Yoruba seek to discover character and destiny, using rituals filled with improvisatory transformations to mark the stability and ever-present change inherent in life itself.

See also Africa, West; Islam

Further Reading

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