

**Santería: Correcting the  
Myths and Uncovering the  
Realities of a Growing  
Religion**

*Mary Ann Clark*

**PRAEGER**

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Realities of a Growing Religion

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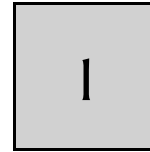
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# Introduction



Many years ago my godfather called me. He had just done a reading for an African American woman who knew practically nothing about the religious tradition commonly known as Santería. Although he was very well read himself, he wanted to know if I could recommend any books about the religion suitable for her to read. We both knew that although the tradition was an oral one in which newcomers were expected to listen and learn, Americans generally wanted to read about subjects they had developed an interest in. As we discussed the possibilities, we decided that there were not very many good options. Many fell into the “easy read” category and contained much misinformation and focused too much on the most exotic elements of the tradition. Other scholarly works were well-researched but would put off some readers. And there were some materials for Spanish-speakers, but often there were no English versions or the translations were poorly done.

Since that time there has been an explosion of works about Santería and related traditions, most of it done by scholars who are also participants at some level in the traditions they are describing. Although these generally are quite well done, written to meet the rigorous demands of scholarly inquiry, they tend to focus on some important aspect of the tradition and often do not provide the introductory material newcomers are looking for. Were my godfather to call me today we’d still have a hard time finding something that presents an accurate and sympathetic introduction to this religious tradition while drawing on the current scholarly research but isn’t filled with the jargon we scholars are so fond of using.

Santería is one of the religions developed by Africans and brought to the Americas. It is part of a religious system generically called “Orisha worship” that has spread from Africa to the Americas and around the world. There are variants of these traditions throughout the Americas, including on many islands of the Caribbean and Brazil. As they developed in Cuba, these traditions are commonly called Santería, but may also be known as *Lukumí* (or *Lucumí*), *Regla de Ocha*, Yoruba Traditional Religion, or Orisha. In the late 1980s Sandra Barnes estimated that more than 70 million African and American people participated in, or were familiar with, the various forms of Orisha worship, including traditional religions in West Africa, Vodun in Haiti, Candomblé in Brazil, Shango religion in Trinidad, Santería in Cuba, and of course variants of all of these in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Today there are practitioners of these traditions around the world including Europe and Asia. Mary Pat Fisher estimates that there are currently about 100 million practitioners in the U.S. and Latin America alone.<sup>2</sup>

Orisha worship is based on the indigenous religious traditions of the Yoruba-speaking people from what is now southwestern Nigeria and eastern Benin. It was brought to the Americas by enslaved peoples destined for the Caribbean and South America. Santería was developed in Cuba in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries principally by the *gente de color*, that is the free people of color, living in Havana and the surrounding cities. Like many traditional religions Orisha worship is based on a cosmological system that recognizes a single great god, known as Olodumare, and many subsidiary deities. These secondary deities, known as the Orisha, are the focus of ritual attention, and every portion of the religion revolves around them. Although in their original African context most people were henotheistic, worshipping only a few of the innumerable Orisha, as the religion developed in Cuba the primary pantheon narrowed to encompass about 20 named deities who are known and worshipped by most practitioners, as well as many others that are rarer and less well-known.

The religion was brought to the United States in two principal waves. One was in the early 1960s after the Cuban Revolution, and a second with the *Marielitos* who escaped from the island in the 1980s during the so-called Mariel boatlift. Since then it has spread to the larger Hispanic community, to the African American community, and to America at large. Today practitioners can be found in every state in the union, and courses on Orisha and related traditions are taught in many colleges and universities. As the number of practitioners has grown, so has public awareness.

This book is intended to be a basic introduction to these traditions in the United States. It is designed to be appropriate for seekers like the young woman mentioned above since it assumes no prior familiarity with the religion or its traditions. Because of the secretive nature of the Orisha traditions (there are few public religious centers and most events are home-based and private), books such as this can provide an important service by answering

basic questions about the tradition. It cannot, of course, take the place of interaction with knowledgeable members of these religious traditions. My hope is that this book will help seekers to learn more about basic elements of the religion including the Orisha, the place of divination and sacrifice, and the workings of religious congregations. However, those who want to participate in one of these traditions will need to seek out a religious community and ask for guidance from a properly initiated and trained priest.

Those who have been invited to a religious event and need a quick etiquette guide, what to wear, what to bring and what to expect, can turn to a list of do's and don'ts for participation at the event in the Basic Etiquette for Newcomers section at the end of Chapter 7, "Religious Rituals."

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Although *Santería* is the popular name for this religious tradition, many practitioners find that name offensive and prefer to use other terms, including *Regla de Ocha* (or simply *Ocha*), *Lukumi* (or *Lucumi*), Yoruba Traditional Religion, *Ifa*, or simply *Orisha* religion. Each of these terms represents a certain agenda and understanding of the tradition. The terminology used by *Orisha* practitioners is a mix of Yoruba (designated as Yr.), Spanish (Sp.), a creolized version of Yoruba known as *Lukumi* (Lk.), English, and some Kongo (Kg.) words. Although calling the *Orisha*, the deities, *santos* or holy beings began quite early in Cuba, it appears that the terminology *Santería*, along with the corresponding identification of the priests as *santero* and *santera*, was developed in the mid 1930s by the Afro-Cuban scholar Rómulo Lachatañeré to replace the earlier use of the terms *brujería* (witchcraft) and *brujo/a* (witch) in the popular press.<sup>3</sup> The terms *santero* and *santera* were existing Spanish words used to refer to people who dedicated their lives to the maintenance of certain shrines or to those who made their living creating the statues of the saints that were so popular at the time. The problem with attempting to replace a derogatory term with a more neutral one is that the neutral term often picks up the offensive nature of the original term. Thus it has been with *Santería*. For many practitioners, the new term is as insulting as the old term was.

For practitioners who are Spanish-speaking or who are associated with Spanish-speaking religious communities, the "official" name of the religion is *Regla de Ocha*. This is a mixed Yoruba-Spanish phrase. "Regla" or "rule" is used throughout Cuba to refer to different religious organizations, not only the Afro-Cuban groups but also the different Catholic religious orders. For example, the Central African traditions of Palo Monte and Palo Mayombe are known as *Regla de Congo* and the Franciscans as *Regla de San Francisco* (Rule of Saint Francis). "Ocha" is a contraction of the word "Orisha," so that *Regla de Ocha* means the rule or order of the *Orisha*. This

is a more neutral term that is widely accepted both in its fullness and shortened to simply “Ocha.”

Another long-standing designation is the term *Lukumi* (or its Spanish variant *Lucumi*), which was the name widely used to designate both the geographic area that was home to the Yoruba-speaking people and as the name of the people who lived there. Originally, the Lukumi were only the inhabitants of the ancient city of Oyo, but it soon was generalized to include all the Yoruba-speaking people from that area of West Africa. A long-standing term that shows up on some of the earliest maps of the area, *lukumi* also may have come from the Yoruba phrase *oluku mi*, “my friend.” Practitioners who want to emphasize the African origins of the religion often prefer *Lukumi* to the Spanish-language designators.

Another way of calling attention to the religion’s African roots is to refer to it as *Yoruba Traditional Religion*, although few in contemporary Nigeria would claim this as their own tradition, preferring other religious traditions. According to the CIA Fact Book’s information on Nigeria, today only 10 percent of the people are adherents of what they call “indigenous beliefs.” The remaining 90 percent are Muslim (50%) and Christian (40%).<sup>4</sup> This means that there are probably more followers of these traditions in the Americas than in the homeland of the Orisha. This terminology is misleading in that there was no single Yoruba traditional religion; rather, during pre-colonial times before Christian missionaries made the declaration of one’s “faith” important, the Yoruba-speaking people worshiped in groups dedicated to one or more of the Orisha. There was no word for “religion,” as these activities were tightly integrated into their day-to-day lives. As with many religious traditions around the world, the essential feature was not belief, but practice. One didn’t believe in Shango or Oshun or Obatala, but rather served them.

The most general way of referring to this tradition and its sister traditions is *Orisha religion*. In addition to Santería and its many variants, Orisha religion includes the remnants of the traditions remaining in Nigeria as well as the traditions that developed in the Americas, including Candomblé in Brazil, portions of Vodou in Haiti, and Shango in Trinidad. While maintaining the African roots of the tradition, this term focuses on the deities rather than a geographic or ethnic designation. Although I will concentrate on the Orisha tradition as it has flourished in the United States, much of what I will be saying applies in whole or in part to the other Orisha traditions around the world. Although all of these names can be used, those who are involved with a local religious community should use the terminology that community prefers.

This religion is often described as having grown out of the Afro-Cuban experience of slavery, as an attempt by the Africans and their children to temporarily rise above their enslaved state by imagining themselves to be kings and queens, gods and goddesses. In spite of the fact that the religion as it

exists today developed during the era of Cuban colonization and slavery, it is important to realize that it is closely aligned with the royal and popular practices of the precolonial Yoruba-speaking people, especially those from the capital city of Oyo. While it is true, as one of her informants told Lydia Cabrera, “to make Santo it is to make a king, and kariocha [initiation] is a ceremony of kings, like those of the palace of Lucumi kings,”<sup>5</sup> it is important to realize that this tradition was not developed in reaction to the servitude of the African peoples in Cuba. The traditions are much older and are based on a time when the Lukumi, the peoples of Oyo, were themselves the rulers of an extensive empire.

While many practitioners refer to themselves by the name of the tradition they follow (“I am Lukumi” or “I am Ifa”) there are several additional terms that are used to identify practitioners of these traditions including santero/a, santerian, olorisha, babalocha, iyalocha, and babalawo. As with the different terms used to name the traditions, these terms reflect political and social agendas. For those who identify with Santería or Regla de Ocha, “santero” (male) or “santera” (female) can be used to identify practitioners. Even though these terms refer to initiate priests, they are often generalized to include anyone who participates in the tradition. Sometimes outsiders who are unfamiliar with the tradition will use the term “santerians” to refer to practitioners, but that is a neologism not used by practitioners themselves. For those who prefer African terminology, olorisha (one who owns an Orisha), babalocha (father of Orisha), and iyalocha (mother of Orisha) can be used to distinguish initiated priests, olorisha, from priests who have initiated others into the tradition, iyalocha and babalocha. Priests in the Ifa tradition are known as “babalawo” (father of mystery) or either iyanifa (mother of Ifa) or “iyalawo” (mother of mystery). There are also a group of Yoruba terms used in some communities to refer to those with different levels of involvement in the tradition, including “aleyo” (Yr. stranger) for someone with either no initiations or only the Necklaces ritual; “aborisha” (Yr. Orisha worshipper) for someone who has received an vivified Orisha icon, generally the Warriors, for worship in their own home; and “iyawo,” which refers to a new priestly initiate during their one-year novitiate period. In this book I will generally use the term “devotee” to refer to anyone who is involved in one of the traditions, “practitioner” for someone who has received some rituals or initiations, and “priest” for an initiated priest.

### MAGIC, SUPERSTITION, AND RELIGION

It is common among both scholars and non-scholars to attempt to distinguish between the practices of religion and those of magic. Without a preexisting notion that a particular practice is religious or superstitious, observers are often at a loss to distinguish between the two. Familiar religious practices, then, become the model used to judge all religious practices.

Thus, for Americans familiar with Christian traditions, a group of people gathered in a church to pray for rain or for the health and well-being of a member of the congregation is perceived as a religious act, while a similar group of people gathered under the open sky to dance and chant for rain or making offering on the bank of a river is not. As a culture we tend to belittle unfamiliar traditions, calling them either evil, superstitious, and wrong, or silly, ridiculous, and foolish. Often the term “cult” is used to describe such traditions.

The word “cult” has legitimate scholarly uses in respect to religious traditions to describe groups of people who follow a single religious leader or whose worship centers on a single deity in a larger pantheon as in the “Jesus cult” or the “cult of Isis.” The term is often used in older anthropological and sociological literature to describe the groups in strange and exotic areas. In popular culture, the word is most often used in a derogatory way to mean a group of people whose beliefs and practices are so far outside the mainstream that they are sinister, anti-social, and generally dangerous to either their members and the larger society or both. Many new religious movements and traditions, because they have relatively few members, follow novel belief systems, and engage in idiosyncratic practices, are disparaged in the media as “dangerous cults.”

The Orisha traditions are often lumped together with other African-based traditions and described as “Voodoo cults,” which is doubly disparaging given the extremely negative connotations associated with the term “Voodoo.” Vodun (also called Voudou, Vodou, Vudun, Vodoun and other phonetically equivalent terms) is an African-based tradition, similar in many ways to the Orisha traditions, which developed in Haiti by people taken from the West Africa, many from the kingdoms of Dahomey and Kongo. Although it is considered pejorative, some scholars use the term “voodoo” for a variant of the same tradition as it developed in New Orleans in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> In the United States the term “voodoo” is widely associated with mysterious black magical practices including spells and potions, zombies, and the sticking of pins into dolls to punish errant lovers and spouses. “Voodoo” is so well understood in popular culture as a superstitious and misguided practice that certain non-religious practices can be disparaged simply by the addition of the modifier of “voodoo” as was done in the 1980s when certain economic theories were called “voodoo economics.”

Accusations of “witchcraft” (Sp. *brujería*) are another way misunderstood and minority traditions are disparaged by the mainstream culture. Although the term has a variety of meanings, “witchcraft” generally has the connotation of the use of non-material powers for personal gain or to harm others. The first scholarly book written about the religious traditions of Afro-Cubans was called *Los negros brujos (The Black Witches)*.<sup>7</sup> Writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the young lawyer Fernando Ortiz set out to prove that Cuba’s black population was afflicted by immortality and

witchcraft. Using the language of medicine, Ortiz condemned the whole of Afro-Cuban culture and practices as a social pathology that could be “cured” with the appropriate social hygiene. Even though Ortiz had little firsthand knowledge of the cultures he described in *Los negros brujos*, and in spite of the fact that he later became a sympathetic defender of Afro-Cuba traditions, the stigma of witchcraft continues to plague these traditions. At the time Ortiz was writing, Afro-Cuban sorcerers were believed to be killing young children and using their blood to create potions to extend their own lives and those of their clients. This hysteria was part of a larger panic in the period after the slaves had been emancipated and Cuba had won its freedom from Spanish colonial control when the relationship among the Cuban people of all racial backgrounds was being renegotiated. African and African-identified practices were suspect and subjected to wide-ranging and oppressive controls.

The connection between the practices of the Orisha religions and ideas about “black witchcraft” continues. “Black” in this instance refers both to the purported African underpinnings and to a way of distinguishing between this and so-called “white” or good witchcraft. In the common understanding, “black” magic is malevolent and self-concerned, caught up in wickedness and death. The generalized term for this doubly black magic is “voodoo,” the form of sorcery brought from Africa and practiced by unsavory characters. This usage leads both the police and the media to describe any unusual or ritualistic crimes as involving “voodoo or Santería.”<sup>8</sup>

These traditions are also often described as “syncretistic.” Syncretism is formally defined as the attempt to combine two or more different systems of belief and practice together into a single system. Often the two belief systems are logically incompatible although individual devotees seldom question the internal inconsistencies. Sometimes such combinations are seen as transitions between the old and new ways of being religious, such as when missionaries allow converts to include elements of their old culture into their new religious practices. Examples include African drumming and dancing during services or the use of Native American smudging rituals. Sometimes syncretistic practices are considered a betrayal of the original purity of one or the other of the traditions, an example of ignorance, or of theological confusion. The Orisha traditions are often described as a syncretistic religion that combines elements of West African Orisha cults and Spanish colonial Catholic religious practice. Practitioners are commonly accused of either corrupting Catholicism with their own cosmology, practices, and language, or of inappropriately assimilating Catholicism into their practice of Orisha worship.

The Yoruba culture has been described as open, flexible, and incorporative rather than closed, rigid, and conservative.<sup>9</sup> This means that people from these cultures are generally ready to take on new ideas and practices and incorporate them into their lives and cultures. The people living in the

Yoruba-speaking area of West Africa often incorporated the ideas and practices from the surrounding cultures. When some of these people were brought to the Americas, they continued to incorporate elements of the cultures they found into their own lives. Thus we find elements not only of Catholic Christianity but also Bantu and native Caribbean cultures incorporated into the Orisha traditions. As I describe these traditions I will sometimes highlight syncretistic elements and sometimes discuss the efforts by some devotees to remove certain syncretistic elements from their practices. After describing these traditions, I will discuss the issues surrounding syncretism more fully in Chapter 10. As we explore the beliefs and practices of these traditions, we need to be careful about the ways we characterize them. In general, all religious traditions have beliefs and practices that an outside observer may find strange, even bizarre. In this book I will be approaching this tradition from its own point of view, not trying to judge it according to the standards of other traditions. I will explain practitioners' religious worldviews and why they find certain kinds of activities important to their religious practice. I ask that this material be approached with an open mind. As I tell my students, I'm not asking you to accept this worldview, but I am asking you to respect those who do.

### ADVICE FOR SEEKERS

Individuals come to the religions of the Orisha in many different ways and for many different reasons. Some people are born into families or communities of practitioners, so they learn about the traditions, beliefs, and practices as a natural part of their growing up. Others know someone who knows someone who is a devotee and seek their aid when their physical, mental, or emotional problems seem intractable. Still others learn about these traditions in classrooms and dance studios where dedicated teachers provide instruction into the cultures of Africa. For some people their first introduction to the world of the Orisha is scary, as everything seems alien and unsettling; for others there is a sense of coming home to the religious tradition of their forebears or of their own heart.

Many contemporary Americans have become disillusioned with the religious tradition of their childhood or, more generally, of the mainstream traditions they see around them. These seekers have a vast assortment of traditions to explore, from alternative forms of Christianity and Judaism, to Islam or Baha'i, to Asian traditions such as Hinduism or Buddhism, to modern versions of the ancient Pagan traditions of Europe, Greece, Rome, and Egypt, to new traditions developed in the United States or elsewhere. For some people, their practice of these traditions takes on a smorgasbord appearance: a little from this one and a little from that. Others spend long years in one tradition acquiring knowledge and gaining the titles bestowed on the leaders of that tradition. Some of these traditions are very structured

and rigid in their organization and practice. Other traditions are more free-form, allowing flexibility and spontaneity in beliefs and practices.

Many of these people, after having had experience in one or more of these different types of traditions, discover the Orisha and want to participate in their worship. However, the Orisha traditions are different both from mainstream traditions and from the many alternative traditions seekers may be familiar with. These are hierarchical and secretive traditions. Regardless of their previous training or background in another tradition, everyone enters these traditions at the lowest level and is expected to defer to those with higher levels of initiations, regardless of their chronological age, spiritual experience, educational level, gender, race, or other personal characteristics. Having gained a high-ranking position in another tradition doesn't give anyone an advantage in these traditions. Through participation and initiation one can move through the ranks of the tradition, but there will always be those who are your senior, to whom you must defer.

Many priests of the Orisha are natural teachers and enjoy sharing their knowledge about the Orisha and their worship with others. However, some of the best and most knowledgeable are not. There is no obligation for anyone to teach newcomers anything, and even the most willing of teachers is constrained by a culture of sacred secrecy that limits what one can know and do according to one's initiatory level. These traditions are based on oral culture where the student is expected to watch and listen to learn indirectly while doing the work of religion. Demanding information is not only rude but also counterproductive toward the development of the kind of respectful relationship where teaching and learning happen naturally.

Many priests are also distrustful of seekers who come to them armed by knowledge gained from books like this one and others. Although there are many books written by sincere and knowledgeable people, there is also a vast library of inaccurate and misleading information easily acquired from the local library or online bookseller. These are oral traditions where real learning happens person-to-person in the course of doing all the work required to perform the many rituals of an active religious household. While books can give a basic introduction to the Orisha and their worship, real learning can only happen through the sharing of a knowledgeable priest who has agreed to teach and train the seeker. In this book I have tried to give a good grounding in these traditions; however, every priest and every religious household will have practices and customs that deviate from what is described here. Seekers should not try to tell priests the "right way" to do something or question their expertise based on something they read in a book. Reading can give one a basic understanding of these traditions but can never take the place of a knowledgeable godparent.

These are not traditions of belief but ones of practice. When devotees speak of *servicing* the Orisha, they are expressing the reality of Orisha worship. Although prayer and meditation are important parts of many devotees'

practice, it is the physical work of preparing for, performing, and cleaning up after rituals and events that forms the major portion of one's practice in these traditions. Much of this work requires advanced levels of initiation; however, there is much that those with entry-level initiations and even the uninitiated can do. A great deal of this work is hard, grimy, physical labor: helping in the kitchen by plucking chickens or making refreshments for the other workers, cleaning, or running errands. Not what many of us might think of as "spiritual" work. Every Orisha community depends on the work of its members to provide the rituals and events required by the deities. It is in conjunction with this work that most of a newcomer's training takes place, as they learn how and often why certain things are done. Seekers must be willing to work with the members of the community, fetching and carrying with their eyes and ears open, listening and learning by watching and doing.

As in all hierarchal communities where some members have real or imagined power over others, abuses can occur. Although there are relatively few reports of sexual abuses with Orisha communities, there are exceptions. In general, the members of these communities are fairly conservative in their approaches to sexuality. Strong marriages and families are encouraged even in areas where single parent families are more common. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual members are welcomed in many communities, and some of the most well-known and highly respected priests, past and present, are gay men and lesbians. Sexual activity between godparents and their godchildren and other types of sexual impropriety is improper and scandalous. Thus most communities forbid priests initiating anyone with whom they have had a sexual or familial relationship, including former and current spouses, children, parents, siblings, current or potential lovers, or sexual partners. Diviners are also discouraged from divining for individuals with whom they have a sexual or familial relationship, and diviners or other priests who demand sexual favors are strongly censured.

If a person decides that she wants to become involved in an Orisha community, she must put herself under the authority and protection of a priest or priestess who will become her spiritual guardian, her godparent teaching her in the ways of the Orisha and giving her the initiations she needs to fulfill her life's destiny. The relationship between godchild and godparent is extremely important and not to be entered into lightly. As in all religious traditions there are some well-respected leaders and some people who put themselves forward as leaders who are unsavory or unscrupulous. In many other traditions the organizational hierarchy certifies its priests, ministers, imams, or rabbis. Although there are groups who have begun to certify Orisha priests, there is no centralized authority that can tell a seeker whether someone is a legitimate priest or whether they are the right person to manage *his* spiritual development.<sup>10</sup> Before a seeker places himself under the guidance of someone he must make sure that they are who they say they are, that they

are active in and acknowledged by the larger community, and that they will provide *him* with the spiritual guidance he needs. A seeker should remember that someone might be an excellent and well-respected priest but not be able to provide the kind of thoughtful, caring spiritual guidance *he* needs. Someone wanting to learn more should go to events, especially drummings and birthday celebrations, talk to the people there, watch, and listen. He should observe both the priest's interaction with his or her equals and with his or her godchildren.

Seekers should take things slow, remembering that the relationships formed through initiations are life-long and absolute. Santeros and other Orisha priests are not saints. Neither are they substitutes for medical doctors, therapists, or marriage counselors. They are common people who have dedicated themselves to the worship of the Orisha. When choosing a godparent, the priest who will guide a newcomer's work with the Orisha, a person should choose someone who seems to be a generally good person, someone who commands respect. If you make a mistake and marry the wrong person you can get a divorce; once you commit to a godparent and become fully initiated that relationship is forever. Just as you cannot change the person who gives you birth, you cannot change the person who brings you to spiritual birth through the Orisha.

### MONEY CONCERNS

Everything in these traditions costs money. Divination costs money, initiations cost money, participation in many ritual events costs money. In spite of the fact that all religious traditions must somehow pay for the goods and services they use in conjunction with their religious mission, many people come to Orisha communities expecting that they should receive love, support, and spiritual guidance for free. While it is true that one can attend many mainstream churches without contributing to their ongoing maintenance, every religious institution must have a way of funding its activities, paying rent and utilities on its building, paying for the supplies it buys, and paying its religious specialists. Many churches depend on tithing by their members and donations from those who have more wealth to subsidize the needs of those who have less.

In general (there are exceptions), the Orisha traditions are pay-as-you-go societies. Every person must pay for the goods and services they need as they need them. Costs of divination pay for the time and skill of the diviner. Costs of rituals include the price of all of the goods needed to complete the ritual, including religious icons and other items, animals to be sacrificed, refreshments for the participants, and some small payment for the time and skill of the priests involved. Prices vary across country and from community to community, but simple divination sessions should generally be in the two-figure range (less than \$100). Major or complex divinations will cost more. Getting

one's head marked by babalawo (which requires at least three diviners) will cost more than getting one's head marked by an itelero. Although simple baths and cleansing rituals may cost in the two-figure range, Warrior, Necklaces, Hand of Ifa, and other more complex rituals will be in the hundreds of dollars. Major initiations can be very expensive. The so-called "crowning" ceremony that makes one a priest lasts for a week, and requires between 10 and 20 priests and thousands of dollars.

All rituals and divination sessions should be done face-to-face. Seekers should be suspicious of priests who offer to do ceremonies of any kind over the phone, Internet, or email. They should also be suspicious of priests who insist that they must travel to Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, or Nigeria in order to receive the initiations and other religious ceremonies that they need. Because these are community-based traditions, if one receives her initiations thousands of miles from her hometown, she will have a difficult time finding a community that will help her learn what she should know to worship the Orisha. This is a problem for devotees living in American towns and cities who may once have been members of communities but now live far from the centers of Orisha practice. It makes religious life almost impossible for those whose religious community is on another continent.

Similarly, seekers shouldn't go to Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, or Nigeria with the plan of being initiated by "somebody there." The potential for long-term problems is enormous. Unless he is familiar with the communities in his target country and knows the language well, such a religious tourist will have no assurance that he is working with legitimate priests and getting the initiations he is paying for. In all of these traditions, the actual initiation event is only the beginning of a series of rituals that make one a full-fledged priest. Unless he plans on relocating to his target country the tourist will have a hard time completing both his initiation and the training he needs. I can't say it too often that these are community-based traditions. If someone is initiated by one community, members of other communities have no responsibility to work with her or train her in the practices of the tradition. Many people have gone off to another country either because they thought the rituals would be less expensive or more powerful, only to return to find that the local community they bypassed would have nothing to do with them and would not recognize their foreign initiations.

Seekers should also be wary of priests who work alone and have no god-children, elders, or religious siblings to help with their ceremonies. One cannot self-initiate or practice solo in these traditions. Although one might find someone living far from her Orisha community who maintains her obligations in the absence of a supporting community, she should look to a religious community somewhere and travel to that community on a regular basis. This is particularly true of someone who is working with clients and other seekers.

## COMING UP

In the remainder of this book I will explore the Orisha traditions as they are found in the United States. Of necessity this book will generalize and simplify these very complex traditions in an effort to provide a readable introduction. Throughout, I will suggest additional sources for those who want to dig deeper into this or that portion of the material. I will begin by looking at the history of these traditions in an effort to see where they came from and how they found their way to the contemporary United States. Then I will explore the underlying cosmology, followed by a more detailed introduction to the Orisha, the focal point of all religious practice. With that introduction, I will then explore how these traditions are actually practiced. I will begin by discussing the relations between the Yoruba concept of destiny, the ways that one can discover and moderate their destiny through divination, and the part that sacrifice plays in the working out of one's destiny. Ancestors and other invisible beings continue to play an important part in the practice of Orisha religion. In Chapter 6, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife," I discuss more fully the way that Yoruba, European, and Asian ideas about what happens when one dies have all influenced contemporary views of the ancestors and the reverence due to them. Then I will look at the more common religious rituals, including initiation rituals and the organization of religious communities into families of practice. Finally, in the last chapter I will look at some of the controversial issues surrounding these traditions and suggest the ways these traditions will develop in the twenty-first century.

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