O rish a,also spe**l**ed orixa ororisa,any ofthe deities ofthe Yoruba people ofsouthw estern N igeria.They are also venerated by the Edo of

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southeastern N igeria;the Ew e ofG hana,B enin, and Togo;and the Fon ofB enin (w ho referto

them as s).A lthoug h there is m uch variation in the details ofthe rituals and

m ytholog y ofthese deities am ong these W est A frican peoples,the underlying religious conceptis essentially the sam e.

An orisha m ay be said to be a deity.Yetdefi ning an orisha as a deity does notdo justice to the concept,in larg e partbecause the term often sugg ests a sortof

anthropom orphic supernaturalentity.An orisha m ay be said to arise w hen a divine pow er to com m and and m ake thing s happen converg es w ith a naturalforce,a deified ancestor, and an objectthatw itnesses and supports thatconvergence and alignm ent.An orisha, therefore,is a com plex m ultidim ensionalunity linking people,objects,and pow ers.

The w ord is related to severalotherYoruba w ords referring to the head.The m ain one, ,refers,firstofall,to the physicalhead atop a person’s body.This visible ,

how ever,serves as the vesselforan invisible ,the orinternalhead,the indw e**l**ing spiritofa person and the kernelofthatindividual’s personality.The exists before

birth;itcom es from G od and determ ines an individual’s characterand fate.Justas the physicalhead perches atop the body,the stands overand rules,guides,and controls a person’s actions.The w itnessing objectforthe is a shrine forthe head

ca**l**ed (house ofthe head),a pointed crow nlike containercovered w ith cow rie she**l**s, w hose w hite colourindicates purity and good character.In them selves the cow rie she**l**s sym bolize w ealth,because they w ere once a m edium ofeconom ic exchang e.The w hite cow rie-she**l** covering ofthe also alludes to the w hite-feathered bird ca**l**ed , the sym bolofthe m ind thatG od puts into the head atbirth.The seem s to say thata good head (i.e.,good characterand a good m ind)constitutes true w ealth.

The head also has othervalues associated w ith itthatderive from the hierarchicalnature

ofYoruba sociallife.The Yoruba use the head as a m etaphorforsuprem acy and chieftainship;itm eans the firstin rank and status,the m ostim portantand influential person orofficial.Ag e,w hich is priority in tim e,is highly valued and respected,and itis also an im portantaspectofstatus and ranking .

The N igerian scholarJ.Om osade Aw olalu divided the orishas into three categories:

prim ordialdivinities,deified ancestors,and personified naturalforces and phenom ena. These categories are notrigid,and in som e cases they overlap.

# P rim ord ialdivin ities

In W estA frican relig ions and in traditions thathave been influenced by them ,prim ordial divinities are those thatexisted long before the creation ofthe w orld as itis now know n. Som e ofthese orishas are prim ordialin the sense thatthey existed before the creation of hum an beings.They em anated directly from G od w ithoutany hum an aid.They are

,people ofheaven.They cam e from heaven,and they sti**l** reside there.O therorishas are ,the earth’s firstinhabitants thatare now sacred being s dw e**l**ing on and in the earth.

# D eified ancestors

D eified ancestors are people w ho lived in this w orld afteritw as created and had such a profound im pactupon itthattheirdescendants have continued to prom ote their

m em ory.They w ere kings,culture heroes and heroines,w arriors,and founders ofcities

w ho had a m ajorinfluence on the lives ofthe people and on Yoruba society throug h their contributions to culture and sociallife.In the Yoruba tradition these w ere individuals w ho w ere able to establish controlovera naturalforce and m ake a bond ofinterdependence w ith it,attracting its beneficentaction tow ard them selves and theirpeople w hile sending its destructive aspects onto enem ies.To achieve this deg ree ofcontroland

interdependence,the ancestors m ade offering s and sacrifices.Laterthese ancestors disappeared— often,according to tradition,in a rem arkable m anner,such as by sinking

into the g round,rising into the heavens on chains,com m itting suicide and notdying,or turning to stone.Such a disappearance w as nottrue death;rather,itw as the occasion of the ancestor’s m etam orphosis into an orisha.Severalprim ordialdivinities have oral traditions stating thatthey w ere once the chiefs orkings ofsti**l** existing Yoruba tow ns.

W hen these ancestors disappeared and becam e orishas,theirchildren began to sacrifice

to them and to continue w hatevercerem onies the orishas had perform ed w hen they w ere on earth.This w orship w as passed on from one generation to the next.In theirnative areas,people form ed g roups thatw orshipped and venerated these orishas and secured a place fortheircultg roup in the religious and socialorganizations ofthe tow ns w here they lived.Eventua**l**y a localorisha’s cultm ightspread to othertow ns and becom e m ore w idely know n.The w orship ofotherdeified ancestors,how ever,rem ained confined to the tow ns w here itoriginated,even som etim es restricted to particularfam ilies orlineages.

# Personified naturalforces and phenom ena

From the Yoruba pointofview ,any elem entofthe naturalw orld thathas m anifold and

usefulfunctions forhum an beings has a spiritdw e**l**ing in it.There are m any spirits ofthis kind,butsom e ofthem are so preem inentthatthey supersede allothers;they too are orishas.Am ong them are the earth;rivers,lakes,and lagoons;and m ountains,certain trees,and the w ind.W orship is directed atthe orisha thatdw e**l**s w ithin the natural

phenom enon,often atthe site w here the naturalphenom enon m anifests itself.

These specific forces ofnature are partofthe orisha because the cultofthe orishas directs itselftow ard them .The orishas,how ever,are only one aspectofthese naturalforces.An orisha is thatpartofa naturalforce thatis disciplined and contro**l**able and thatcan be cultivated by people using ritualm eans.There is alw ays the otherpart— the partofthe

naturalforce thatcan be explored butnevercom pletely know n,the aspectofnature that w i**l** alw ays rem ain w ild and escape definition.To the benefitofhum an beings,the orishas m ediate betw een hum anity and these forces ofthe naturalw orld by putting the tam able aspects ofnature underhum an controlw hile standing betw een hum anity and thatpart ofnature thatcannotbe tam ed,hem m ed in,orcontro**l**ed by hum an beings.

O risha w orshippers see the tam ed naturalforce and the deified ancestoras indissolubly linked.This unity is represented by a w itnessing objectthatacts as the m aterialsupportof an orisha’s pow erto com m and and cause thing s to happen.A co**l**ection ofthese objects, even ifitis notperm anent,constitutes an altarw here the orisha is presentand can be

addressed through prayers and offerings.In this contextthe altarm ay be referred to as the orisha oras the orisha’s face.Everything thatw entinto form ing these w itnessing objects— from leaves,earth,m etal,pottery,oranim albones to the incantations and sacrifices that praised and coerced the orisha’s m any pow ers to lodge in one place— becom es partofthe object’s (and the orisha’s)secret.

D uring the 18th and 19th centuries thousands ofYoruba,B ini,Ew e,and Fon people w ere enslaved,uprooted,and transported to the Am ericas.In som e locations in the C aribbean and South Am erica,they w ere able to reestablish the w orship ofthe orishas and m aintain itduring slavery and afterits abolition.In the socialand culturalenvironm ents ofthe

Am ericas,the orisha conceptunderw entsom e subtle butsignificantchang es.O risha devotion becam e a profound influence upon the em ergence ofsuch new relig ions as Vodou in H aitiand Santería in Cuba.

The generalidea ofthe orisha as a deified ancestorw hose descendants perpetuate the ancestor’s practices is reflected in the self-identification ofthe m em bers ofan orisha cult g roup’s priesthood as thatorisha’s “children.”This idea also underg irds a practice of secrecy thatexcludes from som e partofan orisha’s cerem onies people w ho have not

been initiated into its priesthood.H ow ever,itbecom es the responsibility ofthe orisha’s hum an descendants to transm itto subsequentgenerations the objects and secrets throug h w hich hum an being s can interactw ith the orisha.B ecause each orisha has

particularoccupations,places,ski**l**s,preferences,diseases,problem s,capabilities,and m isfortunes w ith w hich itis closely associated,devotees— throug h the orisha’s

priesthood— can m ake appeals to the orisha thatis bestable to resolve the problem they are experiencing .Itis the orishas w ho are the guardians and explicators ofhum an destiny. D espite the ascendance ofChristianity and Islam ,m any Yoruba and otherW estA fricans sti**l** turn to the orishas forhelp,aid,and advice in the g reatand sm a**l** problem s oflife.

G eorge B randon The Editors ofEncyclopaedia B ritannica

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