

Orisha

Orisha, also spelled orixa or orisa, any of the deities of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. They are also venerated by the Edo of southeastern Nigeria; the Ewe of Ghana, Benin, and Togo; and the Fon of Benin (who refer to them as *voduns*). Although there is much variation in the details of the rituals and mythology of these deities among these West African peoples, the underlying religious concept is essentially the same.

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Definition

An orisha may be said to be a deity. Yet defining an orisha as a deity does not do justice to the concept, in large part because the term *deity* often suggests a sort of anthropomorphic supernatural entity. An orisha may be said to arise when a divine power to command and make things happen converges with a natural force, a deified ancestor, and an object that witnesses and supports that convergence and alignment. An orisha, therefore, is a complex multidimensional unity linking people, objects, and powers.

The word *orisha* is related to several other Yoruba words referring to the head. The main one, *ori*, refers, first of all, to the physical head atop a person's body. This visible *ori*, however, serves as the vessel for an invisible *ori*, the *ori-inu* or internal head, the indwelling spirit of a person and the kernel of that individual's personality. The *ori-inu* exists before birth; it comes from God and determines an individual's character and fate. Just as the physical head perches atop the body, the *ori-inu* stands over and rules, guides, and controls a person's actions. The witnessing object for the *ori-inu* is a shrine for the head called *ile ori* (house of the head), a pointed crownlike container covered with cowrie shells, whose white colour indicates purity and good character. In themselves the cowrie shells symbolize wealth, because they were once a medium of economic exchange. The white cowrie-shell covering of the *ile ori* also alludes to the white-feathered bird called *eiye ororo*, the symbol of the mind that God puts into the head at birth. The *ile ori* seems to say that a good head (i.e., good character and a good mind) constitutes true wealth.

The head also has other values associated with it that derive from the hierarchical nature

of Yoruba social life. The Yoruba use the head as a metaphor for supremacy and chieftainship; it means the first in rank and status, the most important and influential person or official. Age, which is priority in time, is highly valued and respected, and it is also an important aspect of status and ranking.

Types of orishas

The Nigerian scholar J. Omosade Awolalu divided the orishas into three categories: primordial divinities, deified ancestors, and personified natural forces and phenomena. These categories are not rigid, and in some cases they overlap.

Primordial divinities

In West African religions and in traditions that have been influenced by them, primordial divinities are those that existed long before the creation of the world as it is now known. Some of these orishas are primordial in the sense that they existed before the creation of human beings. They emanated directly from God without any human aid. They are *ara orun*, people of heaven. They came from heaven, and they still reside there. Other orishas are *irunmole*, the earth's first inhabitants that are now sacred beings dwelling on and in the earth.

Deified ancestors

Deified ancestors are people who lived in this world after it was created and had such a profound impact upon it that their descendants have continued to promote their memory. They were kings, culture heroes and heroines, warriors, and founders of cities who had a major influence on the lives of the people and on Yoruba society through their contributions to culture and social life. In the Yoruba tradition these were individuals who were able to establish control over a natural force and make a bond of interdependence with it, attracting its beneficent action toward themselves and their people while sending its destructive aspects onto enemies. To achieve this degree of control and interdependence, the ancestors made offerings and sacrifices. Later these ancestors disappeared—often, according to tradition, in a remarkable manner, such as by sinking into the ground, rising into the heavens on chains, committing suicide and not dying, or turning to stone. Such a disappearance was not true death; rather, it was the occasion of the ancestor's metamorphosis into an orisha. Several primordial divinities have oral traditions stating that they were once the chiefs or kings of still-existing Yoruba towns.

When these ancestors disappeared and became orishas, their children began to sacrifice

to them and to continue whatever ceremonies the orishas had performed when they were on earth. This worship was passed on from one generation to the next. In their native areas, people formed groups that worshipped and venerated these orishas and secured a place for their cult group in the religious and social organizations of the towns where they lived. Eventually a local orisha's cult might spread to other towns and become more widely known. The worship of other deified ancestors, however, remained confined to the towns where it originated, even sometimes restricted to particular families or lineages.

Personified natural forces and phenomena

From the Yoruba point of view, any element of the natural world that has manyfold and useful functions for human beings has a spirit dwelling in it. There are many spirits of this kind, but some of them are so preeminent that they supersede all others; they too are orishas. Among them are the earth; rivers, lakes, and lagoons; and mountains, certain trees, and the wind. Worship is directed at the orisha that dwells within the natural phenomenon, often at the site where the natural phenomenon manifests itself.

These specific forces of nature are part of the orisha because the cult of the orishas directs itself toward them. The orishas, however, are only one aspect of these natural forces. An orisha is that part of a natural force that is disciplined and controllable and that can be cultivated by people using ritual means. There is always the other part— the part of the natural force that can be explored but never completely known, the aspect of nature that will always remain wild and escape definition. To the benefit of human beings, the orishas mediate between humanity and these forces of the natural world by putting the tamable aspects of nature under human control while standing between humanity and that part of nature that cannot be tamed, hemmed in, or controlled by human beings.

Orisha worshippers see the tamed natural force and the deified ancestor as indissolubly linked. This unity is represented by a witnessing object that acts as the material support of an orisha's power to command and cause things to happen. A collection of these objects, even if it is not permanent, constitutes an altar where the orisha is present and can be addressed through prayers and offerings. In this context the altar may be referred to as the orisha or as the orisha's face. Everything that went into forming these witnessing objects— from leaves, earth, metal, pottery, or animal bones to the incantations and sacrifices that praised and coerced the orisha's many powers to lodge in one place— becomes part of the object's (and the orisha's) secret.

Transmission of orisha beliefs outside Africa

During the 18th and 19th centuries thousands of Yoruba, Bini, Ewe, and Fon people were enslaved, uprooted, and transported to the Americas. In some locations in the Caribbean and South America, they were able to reestablish the worship of the orishas and maintain it during slavery and after its abolition. In the social and cultural environments of the Americas, the orisha concept underwent some subtle but significant changes. Orisha devotion became a profound influence upon the emergence of such new religions as Vodou in Haiti and Santería in Cuba.

Contemporary practices of orisha devotees

The general idea of the orisha as a deified ancestor whose descendants perpetuate the ancestor's practices is reflected in the self-identification of the members of an orisha cult group's priesthood as that orisha's "children." This idea also undergirds a practice of secrecy that excludes from some part of an orisha's ceremonies people who have not been initiated into its priesthood. However, it becomes the responsibility of the orisha's human descendants to transmit to subsequent generations the objects and secrets through which human beings can interact with the orisha. Because each orisha has particular occupations, places, skills, preferences, diseases, problems, capabilities, and misfortunes with which it is closely associated, devotees—through the orisha's priesthood—can make appeals to the orisha that is best able to resolve the problem they are experiencing. It is the orishas who are the guardians and explicators of human destiny. Despite the ascendancy of Christianity and Islam, many Yoruba and other West Africans still turn to the orishas for help, aid, and advice in the great and small problems of life.

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