



*Voodoo Pantheon*, a sculpture by Cyprien Tokoudagba (1989). The seated figure represents Legba, one of several Vodou spirits who has male and female aspects. Photograph by Wikimedia Commons contributor Mussklprozz. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike license versions 2.5.

## Santería and Vodou

by Ruth M. Pettis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2008 glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Santería, Vodou, and related belief systems comprise a complex of religious ideas, practices, and imagery whose origins can be traced to West African traditions. Arising in African-descended communities in the Caribbean region, they utilized collective memories retained by slaves to undergird a survival response to forced labor, poverty, and racism.

In modern times, their emphasis on individual relationships with guiding or guardian spirits (known variously as *orishas*, *santos*, or *loa*) has expanded their appeal to many others who, for a variety of causes, feel disenfranchised from Western religion.

Among them are proponents of woman-centered spirituality drawn to the formidable personas of female spirits such as Yemayá, and glbtq followers attracted by the androgynous aspects of certain of the orishas and by the cross-gender possibilities of spirit possession rituals. The latter are ceremonial trances in which devotees surrender their consciousness to the personality of an orisha, who then interacts with congregants to advise or prophesy.

In the New World, African believers incorporated concepts from the Roman Catholic Church, especially in merging the identities of African spirits with the Catholic saints, or "santos." Although anthropologists often cite this as a classic example of syncretism--the blending of differing beliefs and practices--originally it may have been a survival strategy to disguise and protect the African style of worship from attempts to suppress it.

Unlike the Abrahamic faiths, African diasporic traditions do not necessarily cultivate a worldview of good versus evil. Instead, adherents develop individual relationships with their favorite guardian spirits and invoke their aid through food offerings, animal sacrifice, or the energy from lit candles. In this way, individuals are promised access to a source of power for resolving personal crises and--in extremis--accessing a lifeline for the soul.

Related traditions are Candomblé (Brazil), Shango (Trinidad and Grenada), Kumina (Jamaica), Kele (St. Lucia), and Louisiana Voodoo (U.S.).

### Santería

Santería arose in Cuba in the 1800s. Also known as Lucumi or Regla de Ocha, its concepts derive from the religion practiced in the Yoruba city-states in what today are Nigeria and Benin. Yoruba religion posited the omnipresence of a life-force, called *ashé*, which can be tapped for good or ill by those initiated into its mysteries. From *ashé* rose the creator Oludumare who, while non-anthropomorphic when considered as a whole, can manifest through many different facets, including male and female personas.

Oludumare gave rise to the *orishas*, a pantheon of subordinate deities with unique personalities. Central to

Yoruba-derived beliefs, the orishas can be induced to intercede in human affairs or offer advice to their devotees via offerings, divination, and spirit possession.

The Yoruba recognized over 1700 orishas. Africans uprooted to Cuba by slavery managed, over the generations, to preserve knowledge of about two dozen orishas. Of these a few rose to prominence in Santería as the Seven African Powers, five of whom have significant glbtq associations.

These include Obatalá, the supreme orisha, responsible for human heads and thus associated with mental clarity and lawgiving. He has a dual-gender capacity to enable fertility as well as several female personifications, and is sometimes associated with same-sex love.

Yemayá, the queenly mother spirit who presides over the sea, is often depicted as a woman warrior and symbol of female strength; she took several male orishas as husbands and is Changó's mother, but is sometimes also linked with female orisha Oshún.

Elleguá is a trickster linked by Christians to the devil but his role, as lord of crossroads, makes him important in human choices. He is sometimes seen as hostile to homosexuals but he has several female personas.

Changó (also Shangó) is associated with machismo and womanizing. His waywardness with women was somewhat moderated by Yemayá. Relatively recently, he has gained an appeal to gay men drawn to masculinity.

Oshún is the orisha of love, eroticism, sensuality, and the arts. She presides over rivers and lakes and is invoked as a patron by gay men, lesbians, and transsexuals. She is sometimes linked romantically with Yemayá.

A number of lesser orishas are also of interest, including the following.

Inlé, the androgynous lover of Yemayá, is considered woman-like and beautiful and has come to be seen as a protector of gay men and lesbians. Because Yemayá cut out his tongue so he couldn't gossip about their affair, he can speak only through her.

Babalú-Ayé, associated with sickness and healing, is frequently invoked by people living with AIDS.

Oshumaré, associated with natural cycles and depicted as a rainbow serpent linking two worlds, is considered in Cuba the protector of *pajaritos* (literally, "little birds"), a term for gay men.

Ochossi and Osanyin are two male orishas, the former associated with animals and the latter with plants and healing. In some legends, they are lovers; in others Osanyin rapes Ochossi.

Oyá is a warrior woman associated with storms, revolution, and death.

Santería devotees seek advice for personal problems from practitioners trained in a form of divination called *Ifa*. The pattern resulting from several throws of a set of shells or nuts denotes a specific story from a voluminous body of orisha legends that serve as exemplars or suggestions for a prescribed course of action. Some traditionalists forbid women or gay men to interpret *Ifa*, or to play the ritual *bata* drums.

## **Vodou**

Parallel developments in the French-Creole history of Haiti gave rise to Vodou. Scholars use that spelling as

well as "Vodoun" to distinguish their concepts from lurid movie enactments of "voodoo," although the religion's practitioners also use the latter term.

Vodou's spirit beings are called *loa* or *lwa* and can be traced to the beliefs of the Fon people of the former kingdom of Dahomey (now Togo and Benin). They number in the hundreds and include many analogues of the orishas.

Historians Conner and Sparks have parsed the gender-fluid aspects of dozens of loa. A few of these are the following.

Erzulie, the popular female loa of love and sexuality, is associated with beauty and the arts. She is often seen as a patron of gay men; when companioned with the gynandrous (or intersexual) loa Labalèn she is iconic for lesbians. One of her aspects, Erzulie Dantò, is a fierce champion of the oppressed and often takes women lovers.

Labalèn is a gynandrous loa who is often depicted as a whale. She is closely associated with LaSirèn with whom she takes a transgender or lesbian role.

LaSirèn is often considered the Vodou analogue of Yemayá but can also be one of the aspects of Erzulie. She is a maternal loa who presides over the sea and engages in pansexual relationships.

Legba (also Elegba or Papa La Bas) is guardian of the crossroads who acts as intermediary between the living and the dead. Legba facilitates communication between all realms and has male and female aspects.

Some other androgynous or dual-gender loa are: Ayizan, loa of initiation, nurturance, healing, and teaching; Mawu-Lisa, patron of artists and craftspeople; Nanán-bouclou, loa of herbal medicine; and Bawon Oua Oua, Bawan Samedi, and Gede Nibo, members of a family of loa associated with death and funeral rites who are also linked with all forms of sexuality.

A male priest of Vodou is called a *houngan*, a female one a *manbo*. Conner and Sparks cite many accounts of gay men and lesbians openly serving in these roles. Lescot and Maglorie's documentary *Des Hommes et des Dieux* (Of Men and Gods) uses interviews with gay men to examine how Vodou offers them an arena for acceptance in Haiti as well as a response to AIDS.

Certain Haitian Vodou practices--such as using human or animal remains in potions and ritual or inducing the zombie phenomenon, which causes victims to appear dead so that they can later be resuscitated for exploitation--underlie its macabre reputation and are understandably problematic for outsiders. However, they should be viewed in light of Haiti's especially violent history of slavery, poverty, and despotism in which powerless individuals could assert their will only through the ritual manipulation of reality.

Adventurer-anthropologist Wade Davis investigated the pharmacology of zombie death and explored its role in the enforcement of a grim social code. Modern practitioners consider these practices to have been products of their times and marginal to core Vodou beliefs.

### **GLBTQ Practitioners**

Moshe Morad, examining the participation of homosexual men in Cuban Santería, quotes one informant's assertion that effeminate *maricones* are particularly adept at dancing and performing the elaborate rituals designed to please the spirits. He reports that *afeminados* and *travestís* (cross-dressers) were always tolerated in Santería communities for this reason, even during phases of government-sanctioned homophobia.

One of the foremost writers on Santería was Cuban lesbian anthropologist Lydia Cabrera, author of *El*

*Monte*, considered a classic on the subject. She noted many homosexual, lesbian, and androgynous aspects of the tradition. She died in exile in the U.S. in 1991.

Cuban and Haitian migration has resulted in Santería and Vodou communities in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries. Their membership has expanded beyond their original ethnic and national constituencies to include converts from mainstream Western religions. Although sexual minorities drawn to these traditions have encountered homophobia in some circles, leading to the establishment of gay templos, many others have found acceptance and a spiritual home within the faith.

Conner and Sparks devote the heart of their study to interviews with gay devotees in the U.S. and Cuba, as well as with Brazilian- and Haitian-born gay men and lesbians residing in the U.S. They cite numerous glbtq artists who sought the orishas' influence, including poet Audre Lorde, who considered herself a daughter of Elleguá; Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite, a Vodou houngan; celebrated Cuban writer José Lezama Lima; and transgender writer and actor Max Valerio.

Conner relates a story told by a gay initiate who reported that another devotee, who did not know about his sexuality, became possessed by the orisha Shangó, who said to him: "Do not use whom you love as a reason to be afraid of me." The significance of this anecdote is that Shangó, whose association with machismo has sometimes caused him to be seen as unfriendly to gays, is here depicted as an accepting and reassuring "voice" to a gay man.

### **Tradition and Adaptation**

Scholars Matory and Clark, who examine aspects of gender fluidity in New World expressions of Yoruba religion, discern allusions to these traits in the Yoruba language. For example, both males and females possessed by an orisha are said to be "mounted," the term also used for the passive role in sex. The orisha is regarded as taking the male role, regardless of either the orisha's or the devotee's gender. Initiates undergoing affiliation with an orisha are called "iyawó," which also means "bride"--again, regardless of either the orisha's or the devotee's gender.

Some Yoruba traditionalists vehemently oppose such semantic associations and the implications drawn from them. Scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi, as quoted in Conner and Sparks, objects in particular to applying Western gender paradigms to traditional Yoruba culture.

Conner's presentation at a 2003 Havana conference on glbtq associations in Yoruba religion was denounced by Nigerian religious officials who view homosexuality as a foreign aberration, despite overwhelming evidence of same-sex relationships that long pre-date contact with the West. (It should be noted that traditionalists also object to Catholic influences in orisha worship.)

Against the objections of purists, however, African diasporic religions have adapted to New World contexts with remarkable resiliency. They will likely continue evolving and reaching out to an ever-broadening base of membership, including glbtq devotees who find particular relevancy in certain orishas.

### **Bibliography**

Brandon, George. *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Cabrera, Lydia. *El Monte*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1975.

Clark, Mary Ann. *Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule: Santería Ritual Practices and Their Gender*

*Implications*. Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2005.

Conner, Randy P., with David Hatfield Sparks. *Queering Creole Spiritual Traditions: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Participation in African-inspired Traditions in the Americas*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004.

Davis, Wade. *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985.

De La Torre, Miguel A. *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004.

Lescot, Anne, and Laurence Maglorie, dirs. *Des Hommes et des Dieux*. Videorecording, 52 minutes. Watertown, Mass.: Documentary Educational Resources, 2002.

Matory, James Lorand. *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Morad, Moshe. "'Invertidos' in Afro-Cuban Religion." *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 15:2 (March-April 2008): 26-28.

Vidal-Ortiz, Salvador. "Sexuality and Gender in Santería: LGTB Identities at the Crossroads of Santería Religious Practices and Beliefs." *Gay Religion*. Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray, eds. Walnut Creek, Calif.: Rowman Altamira, 2004. 115-138.

### **About the Author**

**Ruth M. Pettis** is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.