

Yoruba religion in the Americas

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 Perspective of a Nigerian-American



OYOTUNJI Village is well known as a centre of traditional Yoruba worship. Throughout the year, the village is host to festivals ranging from the Olokun Festival in February, the Shongo Festival in July, and the Obaluaiye Festival in December.

Under the leadership of His Royal Highness Oba Oseijeman Adefunmi I, the village has become a popular place for both tourists and followers of Yoruba religion.

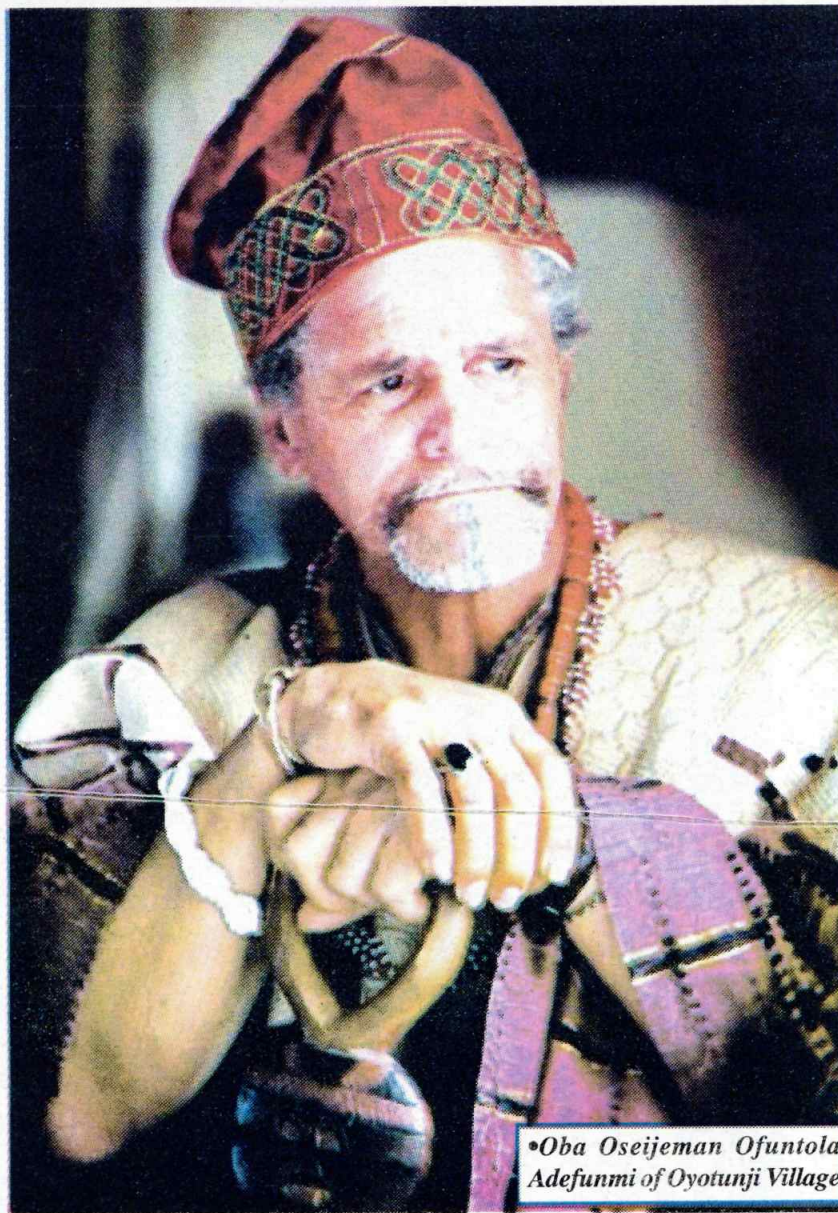
As Nigerians reading this, you may find it surprising that although Oyotunji Village is so well known for all of these things, you have probably never heard of it. The reason is because the village is located, not in Yorubaland, but in South Carolina, USA. Although it is in the United States, the village considers itself removed from the country. In fact, the sign that greets visitors to the village reads "Welcome to Oyotunji Village. You are now leaving the United States of Amerika and about to enter the Yoruba Kingdom of Oyotunji."

Located on Highway 17 in Sheldon, South Carolina, Oyotunji Village was founded in 1970 by an African-American man who was later crowned the settlement's Oba. For those who dwell there the village is seen as a place of refuge where one can live cut off from Western society without actually going back to Africa. It provides not only an escape, but also a sense of pride in their African roots.

According to Kamari Clarke, an anthropology professor at Yale University who has written on Oyotunji, in its formation, "residents addressed problems of racial disenfranchisement by rejecting what they identified as Eurocentricity and embracing African practices as their own."

How authentically Yoruba is the village? To American viewers with little first hand knowledge of what Africa really looks like, it certainly would seem like the real thing. The founders of Oyotunji did indeed try to construct a settlement that looked African, at least to the American eye. The attempts at authenticity are further carried out in how they live their daily lives – the crafts they make, the food they eat, the music they listen to, and the clothes they wear.

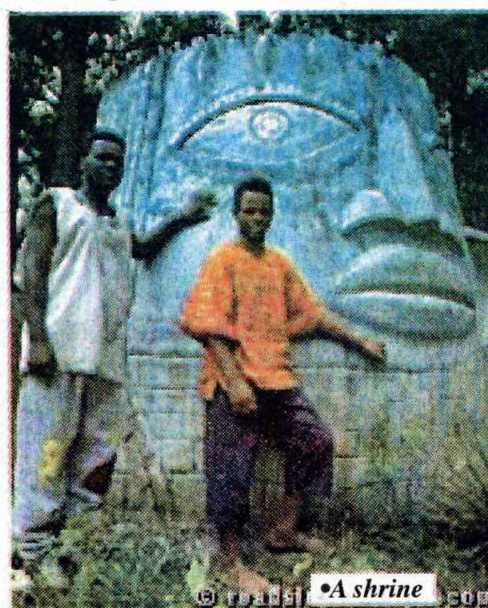
Many of the inhabitants even have Yoruba tribal marks. Much of the settlement's income is derived from visits by followers of Yoruba religion and interested tourists, so it is to their advantage to make it seem as real as possible. In the end though, the settlement is in the United States, not Africa; those within are African-Americans, not Nigerian. Al-



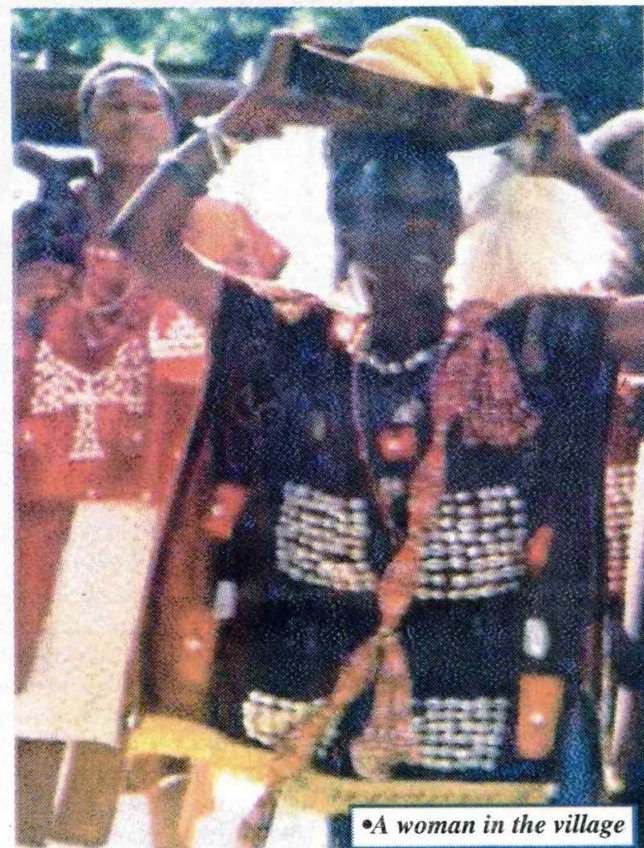
•Oba Oseijeman Ofuntola Adefunmi of Oyotunji Village

though a valiant attempt, the result, therefore, will never be a complete facsimile of a real Yoruba village.

Oyotunji Village is only a small part of a much greater interest in Yoruba religion that has existed in the Americas for centuries. According to Kola Abimbola, who is soon to be ordained as an Ifa priest, Yoruba religion is the fastest growing religion in the New World. Popular especially in Brazil and Cuba, adherence to Yoruba religious practices is also growing in the United States, particularly on the East Coast. In places like New Haven and Bridgeport in Connecticut,



•A shrine



•A woman in the village

ditional belief in various forms in the New World began as soon as slaves from what is now western Nigeria started landing there. According to David Doris, a student of Art History at Yale University who studied Yoruba art and culture in Ife, slavers and missionaries in colonies such as Cuba, Brazil, and Trinidad handed out images of Catholic saints to their illiterate African subjects. Instead of using the objects to understand Christianity, the enslaved Africans reinterpreted the saints in terms of the Yoruba gods the saint in question seemed to most closely resemble.

For example, St. Lazarus became Sonponna and St. Barbara became Sango. By doing this, they were able to create an entire set of religious beliefs around the Catholic saints based on their own tradition while in captivity. At the same time, they were able to convince their masters they were Catholics. For many of its enslaved followers, adherence to forms of Yoruba religion was therefore an act of both self affirmation and defiance.

Elements of Yoruba practice survived and thrived in the New World for centuries. Yoruba religion in the New World remained strong enough that even after slavery ended people continued to follow it. Although most of the followers are of African descent, its appeal is presently growing in other communities as well, especially among white Americans.

In an effort to affirm their own direct link to Africa through traditional Yoruba religious practice, African Americans sought to return to Yoruba religion at its roots. To do this, they purged Yoruba practices in the New World of all the Catholic and other influences and replaced them with practices that were being followed in contemporary Nigeria. Out of this movement came the Yoruba Theological Archministry, a publishing house located in New York City. Out of this also came Oyotunji Village, South Carolina.

While places like Oyotunji Village and all the various forms of Yoruba religious practice in the New World may seem anachronistic and at best poor copies of the real thing back in Nigeria, to followers abroad they represent ways of celebrating African culture. For those of African descent it is also a way of getting back to aspects of their African roots.

American forms of religion, music, and fashion have become extremely popular in Nigeria. As this article shows, the cultural exchange goes both ways as elements of Nigerian culture have contributed to the creation of an entire subculture within the United States and the rest of the New World.



•Royal court

cut, Trenton and Newark, New Jersey, New York City, Philadelphia, and Miami, one can find Botanicas, shops completely devoted to selling goods used for Yoruba rituals.

Adherence to elements of Yoruba tra-