

Ifa & Santeria

For too long, different practitioners have attempted to reconcile the similarities between the philosophy of Ifa and the practice of Santeria. In many ways, this was encouraged by Academics - both Anthropologists and Ethnographers - whose interest lay more in the sociological pressures that had brought about, and resulted from, the Diaspora, than the specifics of how the practices had diverged. As a practitioner who began his journey in Santeria, and subsequently metamorphosed into Ifa, I have anguished over the differences for many years. Like many, I sought to understand the similarities rather than acknowledge the vast differences. **In retrospect, I was making a mistake. It seems exquisitely clear that the two philosophies are so different, that they must be viewed, not as relatives, or distant cousins, but rather as totally separate individuals who must be judged on their own individual merits and faults.**

My own attraction to Ifa has always been the purity and consistency of its' philosophy. A purity that didn't require me to suspend my intellectual reasoning or analytical observations in order to achieve transcendence. In Ifa, there is a mathematical precision and integrity to everything. From the understanding of energy, as represented by the Orisa, to the 256 Odu, which comprise the corpus of all knowledge regarding the past, present and future, there is a logical consistency which allows you a symbiotic relationship to the energy of the universe.

We have been raised in a Western culture that relegates mystical experience to the back rooms of superstition and nonsense. We were conditioned to believe that the use of energy to manifest change had to be an incomprehensible experience. Our own Western religions supported this dichotomy. Judaism and Christianity both clearly separated our minds from our spirits. And so, even though we have increasingly longed for the fulfillment, guidance and inner peace that can be supplied only through spiritual activity, we have tended to seek it in the form we were conditioned to believe it must express itself. With no disrespect intended, I believe this is part of the great appeal of Santeria.

In the Diaspora, the logical, laser like relationship, between man and the other energies that Oludumare had created, was subjected to the Fun House mirror of Christianity. The pure African understanding that life and spirituality

were one experience was re-shaped to conform to the views of the slave masters. What began as a necessity for survival, turned into religious dogma, forever separating the new religion of Santeria from African Orisa worship. The distortions were simply too great.

Yet, what remained as the Afro-Caribbean Experience has great pull to many Westerners. Again, with no disrespect intended, the many contradictions that exist in the philosophy, as a result of the attempted mix of Christianity and African Spirituality, fail to be addressed by its adherents. Why? Having been conditioned not to question the contradictions within the Christianity they grew up with, there is the inherent implication that one must not question contradictions in any religion, that God is unknowable, that it is beyond our understanding to perceive genuine truth. Indeed, there seems to be a certain comfort level in not understanding. It is the same familiar territory we grew up with in Western religion. Such is not the case in African Orisa worship. The logical construct and relationships between the various energies, the ability to understand the present as well as forecast the future, all lead to the inescapable conclusion that we are capable of knowing! We are capable of understanding! We are capable of reaching Orisa status and sitting with the Counsel of Elders at the feet of Oludumare!

There seem to be other pulls as well. For many years, too large a percentage of Westerner's involved in Orisa worship were disaffected from society. Often, correctly so. Certainly the Black American, ignored, abused and penalized by our predominantly WASP power structure, could find the familiarity of the religion that had provided their support system during the harshest years of slavery and economic deprivation, along with a sense of re-connecting with their roots and proud cultural background. It was a heady and alluring combination. Other disaffected groups and individuals found similar comfort, along with the satisfaction of belonging to a like group of individuals who, by their dress and behavior, were obviously separate from the society they felt excluded from. It was an "in your face" way of declaring your independence.

African Orisa worship was, by its structure, more adaptable to social and economic conditions. Its' energies were less frozen in the unalterable Dogma that Christianity had conditioned us to accept. In Christianity God had spoken and that's the way it was! In Ifa, Oludumare had also spoken but He had said: "Here are the road maps to finding the paths of truth, use them!" Because of their logic and consistency, the unalterable principles (as opposed to unalterable rules) have, and continue to, work in a host of different times,

political and cultural settings. We are encouraged to seek knowledge, and to use it. When one feels empowered, one is not afraid.

One can only feel empowered if the worldview you accept empowers you. If you graft on to the Orisa, the disempowering concepts of being born in sin, a Devil enticing you to display bad character, a set of unreachable objectives to reach Heaven, the evil of success and the shame of pleasure, you have created two sets of rules, and a frightening lack of consistency.

Certainly, by my very practice, understanding and teaching of African Orisa worship, I express my own views regarding the two philosophies. I believe, as more and more people are able to throw off the anchors of conditioning of a failed philosophy (Christianity) that weigh them down, traditional Ifa Orisa worship will become more attractive. But, regardless of my views, it is time to recognize the unreconcilable differences between us. This conclusion was supported, in great measure, when the O.L.U. website responded in the following manner to Fajuitan's article on "A Gay Babalawo Speaks Out!..." They wrote:

Dear Fajuitan: Iboru, Iboye, Iboysishe. Thank you for visiting the OLU website and for posting your comments on the Discussion Board. Unfortunately, some of the opinions which you expressed or implied are in direct contradiction with the teachings of the Afro-Cuban Ifa and Orisha traditions which we refer to as Lukumi. We respect what appears to be acceptable in the ile of your Godparents, and we ask you to respect the fact that some of the ideas that you attempted to teach on our site are totally unacceptable to our tradition. The purpose of our site is to promote the teachings of this tradition known as Lukumi. This is what the OLU website and the Lukumi Gathering Discussion Board are dedicated to. We cannot allow, or support such an exchange and monitor it to ensure a 'flame-free' discussion environment. For the above reasons your posts have been taken down. However, your new link to the Ifa Foundation of North America website will remain on the Board. May Oludumare and all the Orishas always continue guiding you in your search for Iwa Pele. Iboru, Iboye, Iboysishe."

Their behavior, response and tone all displayed good character. It also clearly expressed the separateness of the two philosophies. I applaud them, and suggest we all carefully select our paths in relationship to our backgrounds,

aspirations and training. In this way we may have mutual respect rather the similarities.

Blessings,

Oluwo Philip Neimark

IEA FOUNDATION