

Brazil's Orixas - Yoruba Gods and Goddesses Enrapture

By Johnette Iris Stubbs

Abstract

Throughout the world, Brazil is well known for their football talents, their samba or bossa nova music and the annual festival of Carnival. What many people do not know about Brazil is that outside of sports, much of the cultural manifestations in music, dance and art have origins in the Yoruba belief system from Africa. In Brazil, it is called Candomble.

In this lecture and photographic slide presentation, my aim is to share information and history about the Yoruba culture, its historical presence in Brazil and the affects of that presence on the religious and cultural life in Brazil, most notably in the north of Brazil, a region called Bahia. This information is most interesting to the audience at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for The Arts as it may shed light on the similarities between the aesthetic, spiritual and cultural richness of the Yoruba belief system and belief systems here in India. There may be many images and information that will resonate with the audience as they acknowledge the powerful affect the Yoruba system continues to have on that society and on people around the world.

The Yoruba belief system is most importantly an oral tradition, passed by practicing communities throughout West Africa for thousands of years and carried worldwide through migration and the global spice and slave trades. The main tenets of the belief system begin with the idea of one creator, Olodumare, the ideas of Ifa, the creator's sacred messages to mankind and the Orixas, deified ancestors who help guide mankind through as many reincarnations as necessary for them to attain their destiny. The Orixas guide mankind individually and through practitioners involved in divination and ceremonies linking ritual song, dance, music and sacrifices. Historically and depending on the geographical location of the practicing community, the Orixas, viewed as gods and goddesses, are also called Viduns and Inkices. Some believe that because many of the parables, rituals and verses found in Ifa can be found in religious systems around the world, that it is in fact the original belief system and 'thus the source of the keynote to all Religions on Earth'.

In Brazil the Yoruba belief system came with slaves during the global slave trade over 600 years ago that transplanted the largest number of Africans outside of the continent in recent history. During the time of slavery, the belief system was syncretised with the Catholic religion to avoid persecution by the Portuguese, who were the colonial power at that time. The manifestations of the ceremonies, the Orixas or Saints, the parables, the dances and the music continue to affect the cultural and spiritual fabric of Brazil in the present day either within the Candomble religious community or throughout the society at large in the forms of secular dance and music such as samba and bossa nova, in visual arts and sculpture, television, film, literature and in festivals such as Carnival.

There are many written histories explaining the Yoruba system, and a great deal of research on different aspects of the belief system and its affects on societies around the world. Several very well know photographers such as Chester Higgins and Pierre Verger have done ethnographic and documentary studies of the Yoruba belief system known as Candomble in Brazil. This lecture brings together a distillation of that information as well as some images from the past and my own images that focused as a participant observer on a community practicing Candomble in Brazil from 1996 to 2003. I began my own journey to Brazil with the intention of

documenting not only the existence of people of African descent in this area, but to also show the cultural similarities to other people of African descent despite vast separations in time and space. That journey led to discovering not only the people of African descent and their vast cultural manifestations but led me to seek those similarities in communities around the world even as far as South Asia.

(Johnette Iris Stubbs is an artist and photographer based in New Delhi)
