
Stefania Capone, *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde. Religion, ethnicité et nationalisme noir aux États-Unis* Paris, Karthala, 2005, 395 p. Terry Rey

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- 1 The global diffusion of Yoruba religious culture is one of the most impressive stories in the modern history of religion. For a once local “traditional” West African religion to have not only survived the transatlantic slave trade but to have since grown to count tens of millions of adherents (mostly in Africa and the Americas, though increasingly in Europe and Asia) is testimony to the remarkable depth, beauty, and resilience of Yoruba orisha (spirit) cults and the ifá divinatory system, which are the bricks and mortar of the religion’s foundation. It has been recently argued quite convincingly (Olupona and Rey: 2007) that orisha devotion should now be counted among the great “world religions”, as it has many more adherents than several of the religions that usually receive chapter-length coverage in “world religions” textbooks, like Judaism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism – textbooks that tens of thousands of students read annually in universities around the world – and because Yoruba religion’s geographic spread is significant on three continents, and minor on two others. Meanwhile, the ethnocentricism of the term “world religions” has been so effectively demonstrated, especially by Masuzawa (2005), that some scholars wonder whether the term is beyond redemption – indeed, the term “religion” itself has recently fallen on hard times under a similar hermeneutic of suspicion. Neither term is likely to go away anytime soon, however, so one may hope for a postcolonial re-centering of each; such that, just as the term religion became vastly more meaningful once western scholars admitted that non-western people’s spiritual traditions indeed constituted “religions”, so too may the term “world religions” be rehabilitated by admitting Yoruba religion into the ranks of the “great faith traditions” usually designated by the term.
- 2 The story of how Yoruba religion has become a world religion is as complex as it is striking, one that very few scholars are capable of telling on their own. Increasingly of late, however, our understanding of this story is deepening, thanks to several path-breaking studies to have emerged in recent years (e.g., Brown, 2003; Capone, 1999; Clarke, 2004; Falola and Childs, 2005; Matory, 2006; Olupona and Rey, 2007; Sandoval, 2006). Critically concerned with historiography and possessing analytical acumen and rich prior field experience of the Candomblé in Brazil, with *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde*, Stefania Capone adds another important contribution to this literature, one that draws upon her extensive knowledge of the religion in its Brazilian manifestations (Capone, 1999) and upon her rather unique ability to combine historiography with ethnography to great effect to analyze Yoruba religion’s dramatic emergence in the United States of America, as amply demonstrated time and again in *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde*.
- 3 Whereas in Brazil and Cuba orisha religion, chiefly in the forms of Candomblé and Santería respectively, is traceable to the practice of enslaved Africans, such a lineage is virtually non-existent in the US; for African-American Yoruba revivalist religion, the story is more one of retrieval and nationalist/spiritual quest than of “African survivals”. Yet, in spite of the fact that orisha devotion is relatively new in the US, dating really only to the 1940s, thousands of African-Americans and an increasing number of European-Americans now practice some form of the religion. An intriguing question thus arises: why Yoruba tradition, and why not any of the many other equally impressive African spiritual paths that were practiced by the enslaved African ancestors of African-Americans, some of which “survived” the Middle Passage as robustly in the Americas as any that derived from Yorubaland? This

question becomes even more intriguing in light of historical evidence that indicates that “up until the second half of the nineteenth century the Yoruba people, strictly speaking, did not exist” (Capone, 2006: 247), and that among African slaves in the Americas “there were Egbas, Ijebus, Oyos, Ijeshas. There were Nagos in Brazil and Lucumís in Cuba, but no Yorubas” (*ibid.*: 248). In *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde*, Capone provides a compelling and detailed answer to this question, which in itself makes the book a landmark contribution to the study of African-American religion.

4 The answer lies in large part in the spiritual quest and charismatic religious leadership of a single man, Oseijeman Adefunmi (*ne* Walter King), who justifiably receives much attention in Capone’s account. Born in Detroit in 1928 and raised a Baptist, Adefunmi rejected Christianity in his teenage years, immersed himself in the study of African cultures, and by his early 20s had become convinced that the religious traditions of his African ancestors, largely lost to African-Americans because of slavery, were the key not just to spiritual enlightenment but to Black Power and Black Liberation. Wedding these fundamental concerns supplied Adefunmi’s motivation for founding the first public orisha temple in the United States, in New York City in 1959, and later for establishing in 1970 Oyotunji Village, a juridically independent community of orisha devotees in rural southeastern South Carolina. Capone outlines the vast influence that the Village, of which Adefunmi was king until his death in 2005, has had on orisha religion in the United States, with satellite cult houses in New York, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Savannah. She also explains how Adefunmi erroneously believed and taught that the majority of African-Americans were descendants of “the Yoruba people”, and that the rediscovery and restoration of Yoruba traditional religion in America was synonymous with, as Capone puts it, “the cultural redemption of African-Americans” (144).

5 Initiated as an orisha priest in Cuba in 1959, Adefunmi’s early ministry in New York relied largely on sacerdotal collaborations with Cuban Santería and Lucumí clerics, especially for initiation rites, which he was unqualified to perform until 1970. During the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, seasoned orisha priests and babalawos (ifá diviners) from Cuba and Puerto Rico had made the New York metropolitan area the cradle of orisha religion in the United States. The relationship between Adefunmi’s growing rama (spiritual family), mostly African-Americans with strong nationalist leanings, and a mostly white Cuban community, many of whom practiced forms of Santería laden with Catholic elements and/or European-derived forms of Spiritism, soon became racially tense and fraught with accusations and counter-accusations of heresy and illegitimacy, elements of a complex, dramatic, and suspenseful story here engagingly told.

6 In subsequent chapters, Capone continues to trace the development of orisha religion in the United States, including an insightful analysis of the phenomenon of African-Americans’ turning to Nigeria to seek a “purer” form of Yoruba traditional religion than that practiced by Cubans. A notable example, Adefunmi travelled to Nigeria in 1972 to be initiated into the cult of ifá, one of the first among a growing number of African-Americans making pilgrimage to the Mother Continent to deepen their practice of orisha religion, or “Orisha-Voodoo”, the term Adefunmi chose to distinguish the Yoruba revivalist movement in the United States, a decidedly (though not exclusively) African-American branch of the religion that is steeped in what Capone calls Black “cultural nationalism”. Through it all, however, as Capone’s deft analysis reveals, even the most diligent attempts at establishing “purely” Yoruba practices in African-American “houses” bespeak the indelible influence that Cuban renditions of Yoruba cult traditions have had on orisha religion in the United States.

7 Also discussed here are the various attempts to unify and valorize orisha religion by organizations such as the International Congress of Orisha Tradition and Culture, the National African Religions Congress, and the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, including the latter’s landmark 1993 victory in the United States Supreme Court that safeguards the sacrifice of animals under the constitutional protection of religious freedom (O’Brien, 2004). Here, as elsewhere, Capone pays careful attention to the two central issues of debate in orisha religion today: gender and representational authority. She also insightfully explains the essential role of the arts in the development of US orisha tradition, and effectively surveys African-American religious history to demonstrate that, far from being an “alternative” form of religious practice,

African-American orisha devotion shares the same “common denominator” with “the Black Church”: “a mix of protest and accommodation vis-à-vis white society” articulated through “reminiscence of an African past” (*ibid.*: 330). “The Yoruba movement in the United States”, in effect, “... expresses, in new forms, that which has always been present in the course of African-American history: a quest for identity that aims to re-link with one’s origins, wherein religion is above all the means to reaffirm one’s place in the world and the destiny of one’s people” (*ibid.*: 328).

8 As fine and important a book that *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde* is, some readers will likely find Capone’s analysis somewhat top-heavy in the sense that its focus is almost entirely on key figures in the priestly ranks of orisha religion. The laity, meanwhile, has little or no voice in this account; a collective voice that could have provided some balance to the book’s rather weighty emphasis on ideology, nationalism, and identity. As Henderson (2006) demonstrates, for many orisha devotees in the United States, the practice of this inspiring religion is first and foremost about communing with the sacred and finding the kind of meaning and joy in spirituality that has always been, and will always remain, religion’s main *raison d’être*. In popular orisha religion, that is, concerns with ideology, nationalism, and identity would seem, along with doctrinal concerns, to be of often distantly secondary importance, or at least they are not as important to people of color entering the religion today as they were to the first generation of African-American converts in the 1960s and 1970s. Capone is surely aware of this, however, noting to me after reading an earlier draft of this compte rendu: “Je suis d’accord avec toi sur le côté ‘top-heavy’ de mon analyse, mais il fallait faire un choix et pour analyser ce mouvement, il était très important de montrer la logique sous-jacente au processus de ‘reafricanisation’ qui est intimement liée à une prise de conscience politique et un travail d’intellectualisation et de rationalisation de la pratique religieuse. Donc, nécessairement mené par une ‘élite’...” (Capone, personal correspondence, 6 September 2006). In *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde*, she has succeeded beautifully in achieving this central and important objective, and I await with enthusiasm Capone’s forthcoming book on Yoruba-based religion in Miami, one that promises to place greater emphasis on the popular manifestations of the practice of Regla de Ocha, Lucumí, and Santería.

9 In closing, this is a rich and fascinating book of astute scholarship, written with refreshing clarity and laudable analytical skill, for which scholars of African diasporic religion will be indebted to Capone indefinitely. I understand that the wheels are already in motion for *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde* to be translated into English. Once that happens, it will receive much well-deserved attention both in American scholarly and religious circles, destined, as it is, to become an instant classic and to take its rightful place among the most important studies of African and African American religion in the United States.

Pour citer cet article

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