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Orisha Journeys: the Role of Travel in the Birth of Yorùbá-Atlantic Religions

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ORISHA JOURNEYS: THE ROLE OF TRAVEL IN THE BIRTH OF YORÙBÁ-ATLANTIC RELIGIONS ¹

Introduction ²

In recent years the array of Orisha³ traditions associated with the Yorùbá-speaking peoples of West Africa has largely broken free of the category of “African traditional religion” and begun to gain recognition as a nascent world religion in its own right. While Orisha religions are today both trans-national and pan-ethnic, they are nonetheless the historical precipitate of the actions and interactions of particular individuals. At their human epicenter are the hundreds of thousands of Yorùbá-speaking people who left their country during the first half of the 19th century in one of the most brutal processes of insertion into the world economy undergone by any people anywhere; the Atlantic slave trade.

While the journey of the Middle Passage is well known, other journeys undertaken freely by Africans during the period of the slave trade – in a variety of directions, for a multiplicity of reasons, often at great expense, and sometimes at great personal risk – are less so. These voyages culminated in a veritable transmigration involving thousands of Yorùbá-speaking people and several points on both sides of

¹ Paper presented at the 1999 meeting of the Société Internationale de la Sociologie des Religions. This article was originally prepared in 1999. Since then, an impressive amount of literature has been published on the subject, which only serves to strengthen our case. A great deal of new of theoretical work on the African Diaspora in terms of trans-national networks and mutual exchanges has not so much challenged our arguments as diminished their novelty. Much new data have also come to light that confirm and enrich the examples given here. Taking satisfactory account of all this material would require a book.

² I would like to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Ford Foundation and the Columbia University Institute of Latin American Studies for supporting my research in Brazil. Thanks also to Jean-Loup Amselle, Ibéa Atondi, Marion Aubrée, George C. Brandon, Barbara L. Cohen, Erwan Dianteill, Lisa Earl, Ivor L. Miller, Luis Nicolau Parés and Barbara J. Price, Nancy Silva de Souza for their invaluable critiques and suggestions.

³ The Yorùbá term *òrìsà* – *orisha* in the British Caribbean, *orixá* in Brazil and *oricha* in Cuba – denotes entities often described as «gods» or «saints», as well as the traditions devoted to their worship. See: VERGER (1957); APTER (1992); MATORY (1994); BARNES (1998).

the Atlantic. It is within this migratory complex broadly shaped by – but not limited to – the routes of the slave ships that the contemporary Orisha religions took form.

In 1830 the «Yorùbá» did not exist. Or put less dramatically, the peoples now known by that name considered themselves neither a political nor a cultural unity; but identified with the city-states into which the region was organized. Yet by 1895, a British-educated Christian Yorùbá intellectual could confidently state: “It is beyond doubt that the Egbas, Ketus, Oyos, with their subdivisions etc., are of one stock; their manners and customs agree; what is held sacred in one town is held sacred by all of them without exception”⁴.

The concept of a single “Yorùbá” people and its baptism with the Hausa term for the inhabitants of Òyó was largely the work of liberated captives and their children returning from Sierra Leone, particularly as Protestant missionaries. The terms by which the descendants of Yorùbá-speakers are known today in the New World – “Nagô” in Brazil, “Nago” in Haiti and Jamaica, “Lucumí” in Cuba, “Akú” in Sierra Leone, and “Yorùbá” in Trinidad – emerged as meaningful categories in the context of enslavement and exile⁵. The “Yorùbá” can in this sense be seen as a product of displacement and dispersion.⁶

The emergence of Orisha religious traditions in several distinct localities around the Atlantic basin is correlated with similar and interrelated historical processes involving people from a particular region of Africa. Enough work has now been done on the local level to justify an attempt at synthesizing of the various histories and an exploration of their similarities and differences, as well as of their historical interrelationships.

Such a synthetic approach has precedents. Verger’s (1968) monumental history of the «flux and reflux» between Bahia and the Bight of Benin, presented under the sponsorship of Braudel, was the first study to give a sense of the richness and complexity of cultural interaction between the “Old” and “New” sides of what Thompson (1968) would term the “Black Atlantic World”. Thornton’s (1992) definition of an “Afro-Atlantic” region along Braudelian lines identifies an emergent “Afro-Atlantic culture”. Matory’s more specific formulation of a «Yorùbá-Atlantic complex» emphasizes the dialogue between the historically “coeval” Yoruba

⁴ DOORMONT (1990, p. 104). John Olawunmi George (c.1847-1915) was a Lagosian merchant of Ègbá origin born in Sierra Leone and author of *Historical Notes on the Yoruba Country and its Tribes* (1897). Note the centrality of the religious element in George’s definition of ethnicity.

⁵ The boundaries of these groups were fluid and dependent upon the local context. Thus we find the existence of a distinct “Ijexá” tradition in Bahia; apparently distinguishing eastern from western Yorùbá speakers. Other examples of the malleability of ethnic categories include the famed Mãe Aninha, a Brazilian-born daughter of Grunci parents who proudly affirmed her “Nagô” cultural identity (COSTA LIMA 1984, p. 26), and King Macaulay, the leader of the Freetown Yorùbá, who was actually Hausa by birth (SCHULER 1972, pp. 65-66; pp. 148-149 n.4). For related examples regarding the emergence and use of ethnic labels among the Jêje people in Bahia, see PARÉS (2001).

⁶ PEEL (1989); DOORMONT (1990); MATORY (1999). This article is not specifically concerned with the question of ethnicity, but with the processes by which religious institutions, bodies of knowledge and repertoires of practice are both preserved and transformed in changing social conditions. A working definition of this category, however, would certainly include people who: (1) originated, or had parents who originated the geographical area of Yorubaland; (2) spoke some dialectical variant of what came to be known as the Yorùbá language; and (3) practiced recognizably similar religious traditions.

cultures of Africa and America, which “played a critical role in the making of its own alleged African ‘base line’” (1999, p. 74).

A comparative approach to the data on role of Yorùbá speakers in the formation of Orisha traditions in 19th century Atlantic world reveals certain significant parallels and interconnections that a purely local and contemporary perspective fails to apprehend. They thus invite a Braudelian dimension of analysis; in the sense of both an expanded geographical field and a corresponding expansion of the temporal domain to embrace the *longue durée*.

Capture and “Recapture”

Before the late 18th century, Yorùbá speakers comprised a relatively small proportion of Africans sold into Atlantic slavery. This changed dramatically with the decline of the Òyó Empire after 1789. The Òyó slave revolt in 1817, the Owu war and Dahomey’s secession from Òyó control in 1821, the revolt of Afonjá in 1824, the Ègbá war in 1825, the Ife-Òndó war in 1829, the Ilorin Jihad and the final collapse of Old Òyó around 1835 were all part of a regional disintegration with direct cultural and religious repercussions in the New World.

The increase in supply of Yorùbá captives coincided with an increase in New World demand. The elimination by the Haitian Revolution of the world’s single largest sugar producer from the world economy after 1791 propelled Cuba and Brazil into a “Sugar Boom”. This, combined with the export trade in tobacco and cotton, brought some 416,000 captives to the New World from the Bight of Benin between 1770 and 1851, with another 15,000 arriving clandestinely until as late as 1870.⁷

A growing movement against the slave trade after the Haitian Revolution – particularly in industrialized Great Britain – culminated in 1808 in the policy of “recapture”. The British Navy began seizing slave ships on the high seas and releasing their captives at Freetown in Sierra Leone. Between 1814 and 1824, 12,765 Africans entered the new colony. “Recapture” in fact did little to reduce the demand for slaves and may have actually been a stimulus rather than a deterrent to the slave-trading centers of Yorubaland (Kopytoff, 1965, pp. 18-19; 1972, p. 77).

The secondary migratory phenomenon of “recapture” – a direct function of the demand for slaves in Brazil and Cuba – in turn spawned a tertiary movement of liberated captives. The recaptives in Sierra Leone had a choice of remaining in the colony, enlisting as soldiers or immigrating to the West Indies. Those who remained were subjected to an active program of evangelization and mission education, and many became themselves missionaries. Some learned crafts and trades, and others went into commerce. Hundreds pooled money to buy condemned slave vessels and merchandise auctioned off by the British at bargain prices and traded along the coast, creating stiff competition for Europeans. Their trade soon extended to the ports from which they had been sold.

⁷ MANNING (1979, p. 137). People from this region comprised a significant portion of the estimated 450,000 Africans transported to Bahia and Cuba between 1800 and 1865 (ELTIS, 1987, pp. 114-115).

Those who joined the British West Indies Regiment were sent throughout the Caribbean and Africa. Composed of emancipated West Indians and recaptured Africans, the Regiment counted over 12,000 recaptives by 1840 (Cobley, 1990, p. 61). One British observer stated in 1837 that “the whole of our African corps, and a great part of our West India regiments that serve in the West Indies, are supplied from the liberated Africans at Sierra Leone” (Warner-Lewis 1991, p. 11). Service in the Regiment opened a new channel of contact between Africans in Sierra Leone, the West Indies and Yorubaland. In 1865 the Regiment was sent to Abeokuta, and some soldiers made contact with their hometowns (*ibid.*, p. 56).

Those who were sent to the Caribbean as indentured laborers replaced the emancipated slaves who had deserted the plantations after abolition, producing sugar for sale in direct competition with their enslaved compatriots in Brazil and Cuba. Although liberated Africans had begun migrating to the British West Indies around 1834, with approximately 3,200 arrivals by 1840 (Asiegbu, 1969, p. 190), it was the influx of 36,120 recaptives from Sierra Leone and St. Helena between 1841 and 1867 that brought a significant influx of Yorùbá speakers to Trinidad, British Guyana and Jamaica, with smaller numbers going to St. Vincent, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, Dominica, Tobago and Grenada after 1848.

The British also began recapturing slave ships in the Caribbean after 1808 and releasing their captives in Cuba. While only 1,056 recaptives had entered Cuba by 1846, by 1860 the number had jumped to 11,000. Although an indeterminate number were re-enslaved in Cuba, most blended into the urban population of free and enslaved Africans. Still others were sent from Cuba to the British West Indian colonies (Verger 1976, p. 494; Sarracino 1993, p. 196). The Mixed Commissions (international anti-slaving courts) in Rio and Havana sent 893 recaptives to British Guyana, 687 to Jamaica, and 879 to Trinidad (Asiegbu, 1969, p. 189).

After the 1835 Malê revolt in Bahia several hundred Africans were deported to Africa, and after the 1844 *Escalera* Conspiracy in Cuba over 100 were deported to Africa and 1,207 more, including 978 freedpersons, to Trinidad and Grenada (Ortiz, 1916, p. 327).

Throughout this complex of migration through enslavement, recapture, deportation and voluntary choice, Yorùbá speakers constituted a conspicuous – if not predominant – presence. In 1835, approximately 28.6 % of enslaved Africans in Salvador, Bahia were Nagô (Reis, 1993, p. 146). In Cuba, the Lucumí represented the single largest incoming group (34.5 %) after 1850. During the 1820s over half of the recaptives in Sierra Leone were Yorùbá, and an 1848 census put the number at 54 %⁸.

The volume of this final slave deportation and high concentration of people from a single region created unique conditions for the reconstruction of African institutions in exile. Its late date meant that many of these African-born people lived to see abolition – 1886 in Cuba and 1888 in Brazil. Furthermore, many of them never went to plantations at all, but remained in coastal urban centers where they had greater opportunities to organize toward economic, political and religious ends. Residing in the ports to which slaves were still being shipped had the ironic

⁸ The total may have reached 68 % (CURTIN, 1969, pp. 189-201).

benefit of enabling them to remain in direct contact with the places from which they had come themselves – and even in some cases to buy a return ticket home. This pattern of forced demographic movement fueled by the labor demand in the sugar-producing centers of Bahia and Cuba and altered by the British efforts to thwart that trade was thus accompanied by a smaller, yet no less significant, component of voluntary contact and migration by Africans.

Contact and Return

Between 1835 and 1870, as the final wave of captives was being carried from the Bight of Benin to the Americas, thousands of Africans traveled from Bahia, Cuba and Sierra Leone back to the Bight of Benin. Some made one or more round trips, and others went in yet more unexpected directions. One enslaved Ìjèbú man in Brazil was taken to Paris in the 1830s, freed and offered a return trip to Yorubaland via Sierra Leone, but chose instead to return to Brazil via Cuba⁹.

Contact between both Bahia and Cuba and Africa was frequent during the mid-19th century. Ships from the West African coast – known simply as *a Costa* (“the Coast”) – called at the port of Salvador at an average of one to three per week.¹⁰ Africans in Bahia received news from others working on the ships and docks who knew which slaves were disembarking from their home regions. The 1854 Anti-Slavery Society interviews with liberated Africans returning from Cuba testify to a similar situation there¹¹. In the wake of the 1835 deportations in Bahia and consequent repression, Africans began returning home by their own means and even hired their own ships. The same occurred after the deportations from Cuba following *La Escalera*, and the British consulate in Havana was periodically approached by liberated Africans seeking to return home via London and Sierra Leone (Perez de la Riva, 1974, p. 167).

There is also archival evidence of contact between liberated Africans in Brazil and Cuba, such as the free Cuban-born “Nagô” businessman and his manumitted African-born “Mina” wife who arrived in Rio from Havana in 1855 on their way to Africa via Bahia, and the African man who passed through in Bahia in 1886 on his way to the African coast, who according to Matory “had apparently acquired his Spanish given name in Cuba and had gone to live in Lagos long enough to receive an English passport”¹².

⁹ His name was Osifekunde and his story is known because the ethnologist d’Azevac hired him as informant for the first ethnography of the Ìjèbú [d’Azevac de Castera-Maya, M. A. P. 1845. «Notice sur le pays et le peuple des Yébous en Afrique.» *Mémoires de la Société Ethnologique* 2 (2), pp. 1-196]. See: LLOYD (1968, pp. 217-289); VERGER (1992, pp. 17-18 n. 8).

¹⁰ VERGER (1981, p. 229). These included regular mail ships (MATORY, 1999, p. 95).

¹¹ According to the Society’s report, such contact was «not infrequent» and the freed slaves who were «constantly returning to their country» often carried letters from Africans in Cuba to their friends in Africa [1854. *The Anti-Slavery Reporter. Under the Sanction of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society*, London, Peter Jones Bolton. vol.II, 3rd series (pp. 234-239), translated in PEREZ DE LA RIVA (1974)].

¹² MATORY (2000, p. 72). These intriguing findings from Matory’s archival research in Brazil should encourage further such investigation.

In Sierra Leone, it appears that the recaptives expected and even demanded a certain degree of contact and mobility in the Caribbean emigration. Many left with the understanding that they would eventually return to Africa, although this turned out to be more the exception than the rule (Schuler, 1972). Their initial enthusiasm over migration cooled when no representatives from the initial parties (“delegates”) were seen on the returning ships. When delegates were finally sent, the emigration resumed (Wood, 1968, p. 72).

Although return passages from Trinidad were discouraged except to those sent back as delegates, there is evidence that some returned from Trinidad to Sierra Leone and even to Yorubaland¹³. At least 1,690 Africans returned from British Guyana at public expense – often with large sums of money – and more may have left on their own (Trotman, 1976, p. 15 n. 3). Repatriation was relatively easy for recaptives in Jamaica in the early 1840s (Schuler, 1972, p. 88). After British assistance for repatriation ended, Africans hired ships – as others were doing simultaneously in Brazil, Sierra Leone and Cuba. The 253 Africans known to have returned to Sierra Leone from Jamaica by the end of the immigration period included freed Africans from Cuba and West India Regiment pensioners (*Ibid.*, p. 89). A final repatriation was sponsored by the government in 1857, after pleas by immigrants’ families in Sierra Leone¹⁴. There was also voluntary intra-West Indian migration throughout the period (Wood, 1968, p. 66; Warner-Lewis, 1991, p. 14).

These events were paralleled by profound changes in the Yorùbá-speaking region of Africa, leading to outright annexation at the century’s close. It was to this changing coast that the first sizable groups of African repatriates arrived in 1835 from Brazil, in 1838 from Sierra Leone, and in 1840 from Cuba. By the end of the century, somewhere between 3,000 and 8,000 Africans had returned to the Bight of Benin from Brazil and 1,000 to 2,000 from Cuba, with the Sàrós (as those returned from Sierra Leone were known) probably outnumbering both groups combined¹⁵. While some returned to their places of origin and mixed back into the local population¹⁶, the majority remained in the cities where they worked as import-export traders, artisans, clerks in the British administration and employees in European firms. They soon came to occupy a powerful position as cultural brokers and middlemen between locals and Europeans, as well as between the coast and interior¹⁷.

¹³ WARNER-LEWIS (1991, pp. 15; 55). West Indian returnees are mentioned along with Brazilians and Cubans as having helped fund the construction of the first Catholic Church in Nigeria (TURNER, 1942, p. 61).

¹⁴ SCHULER (1972, pp. 89-90). «Your excellency’s petitioners have received several letters of late from their children and other relatives in the West Indies,» reads one letter; «and they are full of anxiety to return home» (*Ibid.*, p. 90).

¹⁵ TURNER (1975); CUNHA (1978, pp. 134; 210-216); VERGER (1953, p. 24). While estimates of the actual number of returnees vary considerably (see AJAYI 1965, pp. 40; 50), contemporary accounts clearly show that the movement was both significant and steady. See for example: VERGER (1968, pp. 21; 38); CUNHA (1978, p. 214). Authorities in Lagos counted 1,237 Amaros (as Brazilians and Cubans were known) in 1872, 2,732 in 1881 and 3,144 in 1886 (AJAYI 1965, p. 51; SARRACINO 1988, p. 222). In 1899 one in seven Lagosians had lived in Cuba or Brazil (MATORY, 1999, p. 84; LINDSAY, 1994, p. 27; 47 n. 31). While there were only 1,533 Sàrós in Lagos in 1872, as many as 3,000 were estimated to be living in Abeokuta in the 1840s and 1850s (AJAYI, 1965, p. 40; KOPYTOFF, 1965, p. 51).

¹⁶ CUNHA (1978, pp. 107; 145; 203); VERGER (1968, pp. 40; 125); KOPYTOFF (1972, pp. 80-98); PEEL (1990, pp. 350-351).

¹⁷ TURNER (1975, p. 85); CUNHA (1978, pp. 210-216). An 1882 French report shows a third of the businessmen and half of the merchants in Dahomey to be *brésilien* (CUNHA, 1978, p. 137).

The repatriates from Brazil maintained active contacts with Bahia, including a profitable import-export trade from the 1830s until the First World War¹⁸. Some sent their children back to Brazil to be educated, while others in Brazil had their children educated in Africa (Turner, 1942, p. 59). As late as 1914, Africans were returning from Brazil to Lagos to spend their last days, even as their Brazilian-born children were returning to Bahia. Matory counts dozens of ships and hundreds of free Africans traveling from Lagos to Bahia between 1855 and 1898, as well as “the repeated journeys of another score of African-Brazilian travelers up to the 1930s”¹⁹. Many articles from West Africa could be purchased in Bahia in the 1930s, and at least some of the vendors were children of returned Africans²⁰. Some families practiced multi-generational transmigration, leaving branches on both sides of the Atlantic.²¹

Back on the African coast, the first Akú traders reached Lagos, Badagry and recently founded Abeokuta in 1838. A few months later, leading Akú merchants petitioned the Queen for a missionary colony to be started in Badagry²². By the time the first Christian Mission Society (C.M.S.) expedition arrived in 1845, there were at least four African-owned ships shuttling between Freetown and Badagry. Akú traders and missionaries traveled extensively in Yorubaland and often reestablished contact with their hometowns²³. Missionaries courted local rulers by writing letters of invitation to subjects in Sierra Leone. The continuous contact between Freetown and Lagos included an African-run import-export trade, two-way movement of people and monthly mail ships²⁴. Wrote one Englishman of Lagos in 1881; “it is well known that the most important men there are Sierra Leone men” (Fyfe, 1964, p. 213). Sierra Leone thus became a hub connecting Yorubaland and the British West Indies – as well as London, where children of wealthy Yorùbá from throughout the Diaspora were sent to study. At least one Cuban-born son of

¹⁸ PIERSON (1948, p. 238) heard of small black-owned ships traveling between Bahia and the West African Coast until around 1905.

¹⁹ MATORY (1999, p. 95). Wealthy African slave trader Bello Akrao is said to have visited Brazil before abolition, and upon his return, converted to Catholicism, changed his name to Siffre, and renounced his position in the Ègùn society (CUNHA, 1978, p. 210).

²⁰ TURNER (1942, pp. 60; 65). See also: PIERSON (1948); VERGER (1968); TURNER (1975); BASTIDE (1978); CUNHA (1978).

²¹ Some, such as the Alakijas and the Bamboxés, have remained in contact to this day.

²² AJAYI (1965, p. 27). The petitioners included at least three Yorùbá «kings» in the colony (FYFE 1964, p. 148).

²³ The renowned Yorùbá recaptive cleric Samuel Ajayi Crowther reported in 1841: «Some found their children, others their brothers and sisters, by whom they were entreated not to return to Sierra Leone. One of the traders had brought to Sierra Leone two of his grandchildren from Badagry to receive instruction. Several of them had gone into the interior altogether. Others in this colony have messages to send by their parents and relations whom the traders met in Badagry» (AJAYI, 1965, p. 27).

²⁴ AJAYI (1965, pp. 40-41). Literate captives were regularly engaged in letter writing (KOPYTOFF, 1965, p. 50). At Abeokuta in 1871, Sàró catechist Samuel Cole was asked by a *babaláwo* to translate a letter from his nephew in Sierra Leone (PEEL, 1990, pp. 346-347).

repatriated Africans is known to have returned to Cuba after receiving his BA in England²⁵. Ìjèbú Sàró J. A. Otonba Payne traveled with his wife to Brazil and England in 1886²⁶.

Urban Settings

In spite of the primarily agricultural nature of the demand that brought Yorùbá speakers to the New World, slavery in Bahia and Cuba included a significant urban component. The urban context allowed for possibilities of autonomy, access to resources and collective organization that fall outside the scope of classic «plantation complex» models of slavery.

The Yorùbá-speaking area of Africa boasts a millennial history of urbanism, travel and trade, and there are indications that Yorùbá speakers found the environments of Salvador, Havana, Freetown and Port of Spain relatively familiar. Mid-19th-century observers in all of these places voiced strikingly similar stereotypes of local Yorùbá communities as effectively organized and economically savvy. Clark writes in Sierra Leone in 1843:

The Akoos who form a great proportion of the liberated Africans, are pre-eminently distinguished for their love of trading, and occasionally amass large sums... From their frugal and industrious habits, the Akoo are called the African Jews. They club together their money to purchase European commodities, which they most perseveringly hawk around the streets of Free Town and in the villages. Many of them have settled beyond the colonial territory, and have formed a thriving settlement. Many Akoos have lately returned to their native country, in vessels freighted by themselves, having obtained from Government passports to that effect. I understand they landed at Badagry. Many of these individuals were zealous followers of Christianity, and will doubtless carry with them the doctrines and rules of civilized life. May civilization and religion mark their footsteps²⁷!

Compare this with de Verteuil's 1858 statement in Trinidad:

[T]he Yarribas or Yarrabas deserve a particular notice. They are a fine race... and seeming to enjoy the benefits of civilization and Christianity... They are besides guided in a marked degree by the sense of association, and the principle of combination for the common weal has been fully sustained wherever they have settled in numbers. In fact, the whole Yarraba race of the colony may be said to form a sort of social league for mutual support and protection²⁸.

²⁵ SARRACINO (1993, pp. 68-70). Most of the 100 "Brazilians" appearing on official lists in Lagos in 1896 were children of wealthy merchants who had received their education in England (SARRACINO, 1988, p. 239).

²⁶ KOPYTOFF (1965, p. 296). Chief Registrar of the Lagos Supreme Court, historian, Freemason and staunch Yorùbá cultural nationalist, Payne wrote the following year: "The unanimous opinion of intelligent Africans is that health in West Africa is impaired, and lives shortened by the adoption of European tastes, customs, habits, materials and forms of dress" (KOPYTOFF, 1972, pp. 75-98).

²⁷ FYFE (1964, p. 149). For similar statements see VERGER (1976, pp. 490-492; n. 60) and KOPYTOFF (1965, p. 22).

²⁸ WARNER-LEWIS (1991, p. 22). See also TROTMAN (1976, p. 7).

The use of similar stereotypes in Bahia has been traced back to at least the 1860s (Graden, 1998, p. 69).

Those Africans who remained in Salvador and the surrounding towns worked mainly as domestic servants or wage-earning slaves (*escravos de ganho*) who gave their masters a fixed part of their earnings. *Escravos de ganho* organized into ethnically defined work groups called *cantos*, of which the majority was Nagô (Rodrigues, 1932, p. 173). In mid-19th-century Cuba, 20-50 % of all African slaves were engaged in urban occupations (Klein, 1967, p. 158). Like their counterparts in Bahia, many were skilled workers who lived on their own and earned money in their spare time, and many bars and clubs in Havana were owned by slaves (*ibid.*, pp. 159-164).

Manumission was common in both Bahia and Cuba, and increasingly so as abolition approached. Slaves had the possibility of coartation, or emancipation through self-purchase. In Bahia many joined credit unions, or *juntas de alforria*, that required them to save only half the required price, with the other half being supplied by a common fund. Africans took particular advantage of such arrangements, and between 1831 and 1852 the African-born free population of Salvador surpassed that of free Creoles. Between 1808 and 1842 an average of 31.3 % of African-born freedpersons were Nagô, and between 1851 and 1884, the number was 73.9 % (Nishida, 1993, pp. 373-375).

Urban neighborhoods such as Nagô Street in Salvador (Rodrigues, 1932, p. 173) and rural villages such as Yarriba Village in Montserrat (Wood, 1968, p. 240) represented “a parallel world in which people could speak their native tongue, worship their own deities, and otherwise preserve such elements of culture as games, crafts and cuisine” (Butler, 1998, p. 144). The Akú villages in Sierra Leone were governed by chiefs and united under a common king (Fyfe, 1964, p. 149). Closed ethnically defined communities were formed by recaptive immigrants in Trinidad through the purchasing or squatting of unused land, the latter practice actively discouraged by the government until its acquiescence in 1846 (Wood, 1968, pp. 239-240). By 1858 there were at least two Yorùbá villages on the island. The village of Abeokuta, founded in Jamaica by Ègbá captives, was ruled by a group of “deacon-elder-judges”. One of them, Douglas Stewart, was son of a “Jesha” king. Another, Mr. Anderson, was called “King” for his wealth and authority as a local judge (Schuler, 1972, p. 82). Similar traditions of autonomous local government and justice have been noted in other Nago communities in Jamaica as well as British Guyana (Schuler, 1972, pp. 14; 81-82; Warner Lewis, 1991, p. 22). Schuler suggests that the Abeokuta settlers’ adoption of certain Baptist institutions served the same needs of social organization as Yorùbá institutions such as the Ogboni society²⁹.

On both sides of the Atlantic, a range of clubs, associations and secret societies constituted a network of patronage and overlapping organizational affiliations that formed a veritable underground society of free and slave Africans and their children³⁰. The Nago settlers in Abeokuta Jamaica were remembered for the solidarity

²⁹ SCHULER (1972, p. 82). Ogboni is a Yorùbá secret society of elders associated with government (See Morton-Williams, 1960).

³⁰ BUTLER speaks of “extensive African networks” involving free and slave Africans and their families, *their* slaves, Creoles and even whites» (1998, p. 144). See also: REIS (1993); OLIVEIRA (1988).

of their social clubs³¹. Like the *cantos* in Bahia and similar associations in British Guyana, these clubs also functioned as work groups (Schuler, 1972, p. 81). Other organizations were primarily economic in character, resembling the Yorùbá *esúsú* rotating credit organization.

The most conspicuous claims to continuity with a “Yorùbá” past today are undoubtedly to be found in the domain of religion. The diverse «friendly societies» reported in the Yorùbá villages of Montserrat included church groups, professional guilds and “secret brotherhoods with their own rituals”, such as that mentioned in a Yorùbá squatters’ settlement in 1867 (Wood, 1968, p. 242). In Bahia religious fraternities called *irmandades* served as centers for the concentration of money and power as well as the preservation, practice and promotion of African religions. The Irmandade da Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte, which is said to have initially restricted its membership to women from the kingdom of Ketu, counted many of the most powerful figures in Candomblé among its members³². Africans in Cuba also organized by nation into Catholic fraternities, or *cabildos*, each headed by a “king”. Originally formed with the encouragement of the church, the *cabildos* developed into vital structures for the maintenance of African religious forms³³. The Cabildo Africano Lucumí existed from at least 1839. Its patron Saint was Santa Barbara, the syncretic equivalent of Changó. In Lagos wealthy repatriates from Sierra Leone, Brazil and the Caribbean joined a variety of secret societies, ranging from Ogboni to Freemasonry³⁴. The St. Joseph’s Society, which missionaries suspected of being a secret society similar to Ogboni, was only open to the wealthy (Cunha, 1978, p. 144), and many Sàrós – including Protestant missionaries – became members of Ogboni itself³⁵. Rodrigues suggests that patterns of organization associated with such African elite groups as *Ogboni* may have influenced the 1909 rebellion in Bahia, although by his own time no comparable organization existed³⁶.

³¹ SCHULER (1972, p. 81) identifies these groups with *ègbé*, or Yorùbá age-set associations.

³² WIMBERLY discusses the “interweaving of religious power, economic prosperity, and local prominence” in 19th-century Cachoeira and claims that the Boa Morte sisterhood “only recruited members from local candomblés, carefully selecting the elite of the hidden Afro-Bahian religious community” (1998, p. 82), thus uniting “many prominent and prosperous members of the Afro-Bahian community” (*ibid.*, pp.85-86). Candomblé is a general term for Afro-Brazilian religion, and may also refer to an individual temple, or “house” (*candomblé*).

³³ According to BRANDON: “The *cabildos* were centers where the practice of Yorùbá religion could have continued with a minimum of interference. The people who frequented them would have had, at least in the early period, direct connections with Yorùbá culture from birth. Many of them would have been freedmen, urban slaves, or Africans freed by the British” (1993, pp. 73-74).

³⁴ CUNHA (1978, p. 169); MATORY (1999, p. 80). The first Masonic lodge in Lagos was founded in 1868 and included “nearly all the African leaders” (AYANDELE, 1966, p. 268).

³⁵ KOPYTOFF (1965, pp. 126-127; 182-183; 1972, p. 86 n. 17).

³⁶ “The admirable secrecy with which the exodus of the insurgents was planned and executed caused general surprise. But it would be considered natural if those concerned at the time had had a better knowledge of the people enslaved. For they should have known that a powerful secret society, [known as] *Ogboni* or *Ohogbo*, a veritable Masonic institution, governed the Yoruba peoples, with far greater effectiveness than the law. And in all acts this association demanded the most absolute secrecy” (1932, p. 87; 1977, p. 235).

Trans-Atlantic Divinities

It is within this framework of forced and free migration, the creation of autonomous organizational structures, and mutual contact and exchange that we must situate the development of Orisha religions in the New World. For along with the movement of Yorùbá-speaking people went a movement of divinities (*òrìsà*), who are today invoked in most of the places where Yorùbá-speaking captives were sent.

The Yorùbá states were highly stratified societies in which religious and political power were deeply intertwined and concentrated in what Peel has called “a class of religious intellectuals”³⁷. The very nature of enslavement linked to intra-African warfare facilitated the deportation of political and religious leaders³⁸. In Bahia, Cuba and Sierra Leone, arriving elite members would have been surrounded by people aware of their statuses³⁹. Their impact on the shaping of Afro-American religious institutions may well have been far out of proportion with their actual numbers⁴⁰.

There is also evidence of a circulation of religious goods, specialists and ideas among these diverse locales during the 19th century. The trans-Atlantic trade operated by Africans and Afro-Brazilians was, according to Cunha, “truly motivated by ethnic and religious values”:

The religion of the orishas was a powerful pillar of identity in Brazil. It seems that any substitution of ritual ingredients of the cults for Brazilian equivalents was made only as a last resort. African objects, on the other hand, including the most secular, seem to have acquired a virtue that qualified them for the cult (1978, p. 119).

The articles imported to Bahia underscore the strong relationship of this trade to the practice of Candomblé⁴¹. The presence in Brazil of certain species of African plants, such as *akoko* (*Newbouldia laevis*) and *ogbo* (*Paraquetina nigrescens*), suggests their voluntary introduction during this period in connection with Yorùbá herbal practice (Ming, Lünhing and Verger 1995, p. 128). There is also evidence of

³⁷ PEEL (1990, p. 362). Africans disembarking in Havana, Salvador and Freetown in the 19th century were not, in Mintz and Price’s (1993) words, “rather heterogenous crowds”, but included “numerous prisoners of war of an elevated social class, and priests conscious of the value of their institutions and firmly attached to the precepts of their religion” (VERGER 1962 : 12-13). Yai affirms: “Among the slaves their were diviners, priests and priestesses, sculptors, doctors, etc., in short, the intelligentsia” (1992 : 262), and REIS concurs that: “Many slaves coming to Bahia had been leaders in Africa” (1993, p. 141). See also MATORY (1994, p. 227; 2000).

³⁸ LAW, 1987, pp. 322; 341 n. 29; YAI, 1992, pp. 259; 262.

³⁹ COSTA LIMA (1977, p. 24). See also VERGER’s (1953; 1992) extraordinary research on the deportation of Dahomeyan King Ghezo’s mother Agotimé to São Luis de Maranhão.

⁴⁰ See for example WIMBERLY (1998, pp. 78; 87). RODRIGUES (1977, p. 100) estimated the African-born population of Bahia at around 2000 in 1896 and 500 in 1903. There were approximately 9,000 Africans in Cuba in 1907 (BRANDON, 1993, p. 55). In Trinidad there were 4,240 African-born people in 1876, with 164 still alive in 1931 (SIMPSON, 1965, p. 9).

⁴¹ These articles typically included (and still include) kola nuts, palm oil, black soap, pepper, beads, baskets, straw, dippers, parrot feathers, beans, skin cream, mats, cowries, drums, and ornamental cloth known as *asoke* in Nigeria and *pano da Costa* in Bahia (TURNER, 1942, p. 60; RODRIGUES, 1977, p. 101). According to one 19th-century ship’s record: “A Brazilian merchant of Ijesha origin, Felicidade Maria de Santa Ana, consigned to a certain Luciano Crispim da Silva in Bahia, the following merchandise: soap, kola nuts, lengths of traditional cloth known as *panos da Costa*, *cuias* and *aguidabás* (strings of beads dedicated to the *orixá* Nana Buruku and her son Obaluayé)” (CUNHA, 1978, p. 125).

religious articles on the African side from across the Atlantic. José Filipe Meffre practiced *Ifã* divination in Lagos in the 1850s with ritual objects he had brought back from Brazil (Peel, 1990, p. 353).

A number of repatriates and their children who returned to Brazil became both prominent figures in Candomblé and successful importers of African religious goods. Mãe Aninha opened the Ilê Axé Opô Afonjá in 1910 with money made selling African products in the Mercado Modelo (Butler, 1998, pp. 157; 196). African-born Tia Giulia, who traded in commodities apparently supplied by family members on the African coast, was a member of both the Boa Morte and an important local *terreiro*⁴² Turner wrote in the 1940s:

Those Brazilians and their African-born children who lived in Nigeria for so many years and who are now living in Brazil not only speak *Yoruba* fluently, but, as leaders of the fetish cults, they used their influence to keep the form of worship as genuinely African as possible (1942, p. 66).

There is evidence of religious specialists among the repatriates in Africa as well. Some had been expelled from Brazil for such practices as healing and divination⁴³. Meffre, son of a *babaláwo* and practicing *babaláwo* himself, returned from Brazil to become «notable and unparalleled both [in Badagry] and at Lagos»⁴⁴. After his conversion to Protestantism, he and a fellow converted *babaláwo* used their professional clout to win more converts, including “a great idolatress”, also returned from Brazil, whom Meffre reduced to tears by insisting that *Èsù* “is the bitterest enemy of God and our souls”⁴⁵. Meffre mentioned the large number of *Sàrós* “who are known as believers and who in seasons of distress return to consult the *Ifã* and do sacrifice”. Pearse reported that “many such resort to him [*i.e.*, Meffre] in Lagos”⁴⁶. Isadora Maria Hamus was born in Cachoeira in 1888 and went with a relative at the age of six to Lagos, where she spent eight years. Fluent in Portuguese, Yorùbá and English, she returned to São Felix and became a leading member of the local Candomblé community (Turner, 1942, p. 64). The most celebrated such example is undoubtedly that of Martiniano Eliseu do Bomfim. Son of a freed *Ègbá* import-export trader who himself had made the trans-Atlantic roundtrip

⁴² WIMBERLY (1998, p. 86) A *terreiro* is a house of Candomblé.

⁴³ “The fetishier Grato”, states a 1859 *Journal da Bahia*, “African who was arrested by the police in a house in Conceição de Boquerão in the midst of his laboratory for telling fortunes, and who was father of *terreiro* of his candomblé, was deported by police for the coast of Africa, in the Portuguese barge D. Fransisca” (VERGER, 1976, p. 472). The 1860 Bahia Police records contain a plea for a similar deportation: “Arrested today and taken to the Algube jail, freed African Gonçalo Paraiso, sorcerer... I come to solicit of your Excellency the necessary authorization to have him deported to one of the ports on the African coast” (BUTLER, 1998, p. 192).

⁴⁴ According to Samuel Pearse (a *Sàró* of *Ègbá* descent who ministered at Badagry from 1859 to 1875), “even senior *babalawos* resort to him in cases of difficulty... his *Ifã* never failed him”. Famed *Sàró* minister and historian James Johnson was also impressed with Meffre’s knowledge (PEEL, 1990, pp. 252-253). A *babaláwo* (“father of the secret”) is a practitioner of the Yorùbá system of divination known as *Ifã*.

⁴⁵ *Èsù* is a complex and ambiguous *òrìsà* erroneously equated by adherents of revealed religions with Satan.

⁴⁶ PEEL (1990, p. 352). The writings of contemporary missionaries unwittingly testify to the strength of Orisha worship and practices such as healing and divination among exiles and repatriates alike. See: VERGER (1953, pp. 16-19; 46; 1968, p. 10); FYFE (1964, p. 213); КОПЫТОВ (1965, p. 59); CUNHA (1978, pp. 153; 158; 161-162).

several times, Bomfim traveled to Lagos at the age of 14 and remained there 11 years. After receiving a mission education and studying *Ifà*, he returned to Bahia to become a major figure in Candomblé⁴⁷.

There are those who claim that this transmigration had a religious dimension. “Priests and priestesses also began a round-trip movement to Africa”, writes Augras, “deepening their religious knowledge and bringing back objects necessary to the cult” (1981, p. 34). Matory (1999, p. 80) characterizes the Bamboxé-Sowzer family as “an impressive dynasty of Brazilian-Lagosian travelers and priests”. The founder of the Casa Branca, Iyá Nassô, is said to have traveled to Ketu, and to have sent her daughter there for seven years of initiation. Her fifth generation descendant traveled to Ketu in the 1960s and was able to pronounce ritual formulas (*oriki*) traceable to a specific family⁴⁸. Such stories of 19th-century Candomblé adepts making the trans-Atlantic trip for specifically religious purposes, while difficult to verify, are by no means impossible⁴⁹. Costa Lima claims that these journeys had both a financial and a religious interest:

At the end of the nineteenth century, the trip to Africa by free Africans and their children was an important legitimizing element of prestige and generator of knowledge and economic power. Even as they traded in a wide variety of merchandise brought from the Coast to Brazil, they also, in today’s language, “recycled” the knowledge of the religious tradition learned from “the elders”, in the *terreiros* of Bahia (1987, p. 52).

While Cuba did not have contact with Africa comparable to that of Bahia, the late date of cession of the slave trade (about twenty years after Brazil) and the local recaptive population help to explain the presence of a number of Yorùbá religious institutions not found in Bahia⁵⁰. African-born freedman Adechina is said to have traveled from Cuba back to Africa for initiation in *Ifà*, and to have later returned to Cuba⁵¹, and Efunche (or Efunsetan) to have voluntarily traveled during the slavery era to Cuba, where he had a major impact on the religion⁵². A letter from Fernando Ortiz to Roger Bastide suggests that Hilario Campos, one of the most powerful Cuban repatriates in Lagos, was a *babaláwo* (Sarracino 1993, p. 70).

In Sierra Leone there were also Yorùbá-speaking religious specialists like Oju Oriare (“Daddy Ojo”) of Òyó, who practiced “his profession as a Native Doctor

⁴⁷ Bomfim also apparently dealt in African goods (COSTA LIMA, 1987, p. 52). His story has been amply treated. See: FRAZIER (1942); LANDES (1947); PIERSON (1948); BUTLER (1998), MATORY (1999).

⁴⁸ BASTIDE (1960, p. 165); CARNEIRO (1948, pp. 63-65); SANTOS (1962, p. 9); VERGER (1992, p. 89); COSTA LIMA (1984, pp. 78-82); MURPHY (1993, p. 213); BUTLER (1998, pp. 193; 256 n. 78; 262 n. 96).

⁴⁹ See VERGER’s discussion of the issue of orality in this context (1992, pp. 87-92). See also OLIVEIRA (1988, p. 69).

⁵⁰ Such as *Ifà* divination and perhaps even for a time the Yorùbá secret societies of Òrò and Gélédé SIMPSON (1978, p. 91). RODRIQUES mentions “Òrò” (1977, p. 238), while Drewal and Drewal (1983) suggest that Gélédé survived in Bahia until the 1920s.

⁵¹ BROWN (1989, p. 94); CABRERA (1971, p. 42). *Iyalocha* is from the Yorùbá *iyálorisa* («mother of the orisha»), translated literally in Brazil as “*mãe-de-santo*” (*iyalorixá*).

⁵² MATORY (1999, p. 80 n.18). While other versions question this *babaláwo*, there is mention of at least one other *babaláwo* who traveled to Cuba as a free person and became important in *Ifà*. His name, Obá Dimeji, means “twice crowned” (with *Ifà*); both in Cuba and Nigeria (Ivor L. Miller, personal communication, September 3, 2000).

which he had acquired in the Yorùbá country before his capture”⁵³. Particularly strong were Ègùn and Sàngó⁵⁴. Of the “worshippers of thunder and lightning”, Acting Governor Pine wrote in 1848:

The followers of this superstition are principally Akoos, a portion of which tribe are addicted to it in their own country... Not a few persons in the community, and some of them professing Christianity, believe that these thunder worshippers, and indeed the Akú generally, hold some mysterious communion with the lightning by which they are enabled to direct its course against their enemies, and upon a recent occasion, when the house of a Maroon was struck by the fluid and the man himself killed on the spot, I heard several persons attributing the disaster to “those bad Akoo men” (Fyfe, 1964, pp. 152-153).

The development of Orisha traditions in the British West Indies was essentially a post-slavery phenomenon, part of a larger pattern of movement linking the British West Indies, Sierra Leone and Nigeria through the single growing infrastructure of the British Empire. To what extent Yorùbá speakers made use of that infrastructure to exchange religious goods and information with Africa – as did the Nagô of Bahia – is not clear, but Wood affirms that those who traveled between Trinidad and Sierra Leone “as a sideline started up a profitable trade in palm-oil and other West African products to the West Indies” (1968, p. 74).

In Jamaica, Yorùbá-speaking people settled between 1848 and 1869 by the hundreds in specific parishes, which remained in mutual contact for years (Schuler, 1972, p. 69). While the Nago of Abeokuta Jamaica largely abandoned Orisha worship in favor of the Baptist church, extant songs testify to the former presence of Orisha worship (Schuler, 1972, p. 81). Shango is today a deity in the Jamaican religion of Kumina and the “Yoruba” a spiritual nation⁵⁵. In St. Lucia, indentured Yorùbá-speaking laborers introduced the Kele cult (after the red and white *ikele* beads of Shango worshippers in Yorubaland, and also called “Chango”). In Montserrat, the Yorùbá-speaking villages founded in 1866 remain today important centers of Orisha worship.

In Grenada, over 1,000 recaptives arrived from Ìjèsà in 1849. They settled in closed communities in which “the Yoruba language was spoken, and many aspects of Yoruba culture were preserved, including elements of the kinship system and concepts and rites basic to Yoruba polytheism”. The religious influence of these communities spread as people migrated out until Shango became «the representative form of African ritual among the Grenadians» (Smith, 1965, pp. 33-34). Many of their descendants still live in the town of Munich today where, according to Pollack-Eltz: “Locals fear them as powerful sorcerers” (1993, p. 12).

⁵³ His son, Thomas Babington Macaulay, returned to Nigeria as a missionary and his grandson, Herbert Samuel Heelas Macaulay, earned a degree in civil engineering in England and became an influential cultural nationalist in Lagos (THOMAS, 1946, p. 1).

⁵⁴ Ègùn is a Yorùbá masking society linked with ancestry. Sàngó is an *òrìsà* associated with Òyó royalty as well as with lightning. Various Orisha religions in the Caribbean area came to be known as «Shango.»

⁵⁵ SCHULER attributes the relatively small impact of Orisha religion on the island to the early cessation of Yoruba speaking immigration and small numbers, compared with the more successful Central Africans who simultaneously migrated from St. Helena (1972, pp. 83; 69).

Other sites of Yorùbá-speaking influence include Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Santa Margarita and Belize. Although some 14,000 captives were sent to British Guyana, there is no Orisha tradition there comparable to that found in Trinidad (Trotman, 1976, pp. 1; 7; 9; 14). While the first “Lucumies” arrived in Santo Domingo as early as 1547, the Revolution spared that country the final phase of slave importation in which Yorùbá speakers were so prominent, and thus falls outside of the scope of this review⁵⁶.

Conclusion

The foregoing is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather evocative; suggesting something of the richness of the data and emphasizing the importance of examining the specific historical dynamics within which Orisha traditions spread, developed and potentially interacted. The significant points of this history which we have attempted to emphasize are: 1) a major demographic transference within a few decades of populations from a particular region of Africa to specific points in the New World and – in the case of Sierra Leone – other parts of Africa; 2) urban environments facilitating the constitution of ethnically-defined African institutions; 3) some degree of communication between virtually all of these points and continuous bilateral contact with the home area itself, and finally; 4) religions claiming historical origin in Yorubaland.

Within these parameters, a critical variable in the formation of Yorùbá-related religions would have been the level of African religious knowledge possessed by the individuals involved. The literature on the transmission of African religions to the New World has largely bracketed the knowledge possessed by displaced Africans and its role in the formation of new institutions. Beyond the recognition of ethnic differences, African arrivals in the New World have in this sense been portrayed as an undifferentiated mass. When studying people from societies in which the differential distribution of knowledge is a fundamental principle of social stratification, one simply cannot ignore the variable of knowledge and the social statutes associated with it. Yet the question of the class and educational levels of enslaved Africans within their societies of origin has never been systematically investigated. The possibility should furthermore be explored that the strategies of organization, communication and travel described above might have been used by religious specialists during that formative period of the Orisha-Atlantic religions.

There is both room and need in the academic study of Orisha religions for a level of analysis that considers them in their ensemble and explores their similarities, differences, and potential points of convergence. The data on transmigration and contact belies the Herskovitsian vision of a cultural “laboratory” in which to examine isolated cases of “survival”. It suggests the existence of a true complex; an

⁵⁶ It is worth noting however the 4,000 free Dahomeyans brought to Haiti after slavery by Christophe – who, according to Smith, may “have contributed to the present persistence of Dahomeyan patterns in Haiti in a degree disproportionate to their relative numbers” – as a suggestive parallel to the Yorùbá case (SMITH, 1965, p. 34; MÉTRAUX (1972 [1959], p. 360).

Atlantic world in which Yorùbá-speaking people who were simultaneously reproducing their institutions, values and bodies of knowledge in distinct yet related contexts of foreign domination remained in dialogue; particularly in the critical years that saw the abolition of the slave trade, emancipation and the colonial takeover of Africa.

Out of this historical matrix arose an array of religions that adherents themselves see as deeply related. It is certainly not invalid to seriously consider their claims. Although Orisha religions offer textbook examples of “invented tradition”, tied to globalization and the emergence of new collective identities, one should not be content to simply identify them as such. What is required is the careful delineation of the specific historical processes by which these traditions were both maintained and reconfigured over time by actors making choices in novel situations.

Along lines broadly traced by the Atlantic slave trade – but inflected as well by African political, social, economic and religious factors – patterns of organization, movement and contact were established and utilized by Africans in the 19th century; often in association with the worship of the *òrìsà*. It is time to explore more deeply the historical dynamics out of which they fashioned an impressive religious legacy through their journeys.

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Abstract

This article surveys the role that journeys played in the parallel development of Yorùbá-derived religious traditions in Brazil, Cuba, the British West Indies, Sierra Leone, the Republic of Benin and Nigeria. Through a general review of the socio-historical conditions within which the various Orisha traditions developed around the Atlantic basin during the 19th century, the author suggests the significance of the multi-lateral contacts that may have existed among these diverse local traditions in the context of Diaspora, and advocates a broader perspective in their study – both spatially; through the comparative analysis of geographically separated yet historically related systems of knowledge and practice, and temporally; through the closer study of the specific dynamics of their historical development.

Résumé

Cet article étudie le rôle que jouent les voyages dans le développement parallèle des religions d'origine yorùbá au Brésil, à Cuba, dans les Antilles Britanniques, en Sierra Leone, dans la République du Bénin et au Nigeria. À partir de la reprise critique des analyses traditionnelles de ces religions « orishas », l'auteur plaide pour une approche plus large ; à la fois sur le plan spatial, en appelant à une analyse comparative de systèmes de savoirs et de pratiques géographiquement distants mais liés par l'histoire, et sur le plan temporel, en préconisant une étude minutieuse des spécificités historiques. L'auteur brosse un tableau général des conditions socio-historiques dans lesquelles les différentes traditions orishas se sont développées autour du bassin Atlantique au cours du XIX^e siècle, en insistant sur l'importance des contacts multi-latéraux qui ont pu exister entre les différentes traditions locales, dans un contexte diasporique.

Resumen

Este artículo estudia el rol que cumplen los viajes en el desarrollo paralelo de las religiones de origen yoruba en Brasil, en Cuba, en las Antillas británicas, en Sierra Leona, en la República de Benín y en Nigeria. A partir de la revisión crítica de los análisis tradicionales de estas religiones « orixás », el autor se inclina por un enfoque más amplio, tanto en el plano espacial, como apelando a un análisis comparativo de los sistemas de saberes y de prácticas geográficamente distantes, pero ligadas por la historia; y en el plano temporal, preconizando un estudio minucioso de las especificidades históricas. El autor dibuja un cuadro general de las condiciones socio-históricas en las que las diferentes tradiciones orixás se desarrollaron en torno de la cuenca atlántica en el curso del siglo XIX, insistiendo en la importancia de los contactos multi-laterales que pudieron existir entre las diferentes tradiciones locales, en un contexto de diáspora.