

PARLAY CHEVAL OU

I've told you several times about my experiences with other religions and this morning I'll tell you about another. I knew several people who were on the outer fringes of a group of Santeria in rural Ulster County, New York. They referred to themselves, when they referred to themselves in this way at all, as brujos and brujas, male and female witches. They called their religion the way of the saints, which is roughly what the word "Santeria" transliterates as.

They were a secretive people and I'll get to why in a moment. But they also were a remarkably gentle people, not much different in aspect or attitude than Quaker farmers or devout Catholic back-to-the-earthers.

Let me give you some background to the Santeria. I want to acknowledge the help of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia for much of the factual information I'll relate. **Lukumí, Regla de Ocha** or **Afro-Cuba**, but most widely known as **Santeria**, is a set of related religious systems that superficially fuse traditional Catholic beliefs with traditional Yoruba beliefs. The Yoruba are a large ethnic group in Nigeria, the primary ethnic group in one-sixth of the nation's 36 states. The principal city of Lagos is primarily Yoruban. In the Yoruba language, Lukumí means "friends," and applies equally to descendants of Yorùbá slaves in Cuba, their music and dance, and the Cubanized dialect of the Yorùbá language.

Lukumí originated in Cuba and historically practiced by descendants of west African slaves. As you might remember from school, slave owners, most of whom were Christian and many of them Catholic, purposely divided families and mixed members of different African ethnic groups as a way to maintain control. During the early 18th century, the Spanish Catholic church allowed for the creation of societies called *cabildos* as a way to provide entertainment and the reconstruction of many aspects of ethnic heritage for both sides. The slaves practiced Yorùbá religious ceremonies in their cabildos, combining their masters' pantheon of Catholic saints with their own pantheon of Orisha. An **Orisha**, also spelled **Orisa** and **Orixá**, is a spirit that reflects one of the manifestations of **Olodumare** (God) in the **Yoruba** spiritual or religious system. This combination would come to be known as Lukumí.

Lukumí's survival in Cuba was primarily due to the camouflage of Yorùbá with a pretence of Catholicism. When Christian slave owners observed Africans celebrating a Saint's Day, they were generally unaware that the slaves were actually worshiping the

Orisha. Today, the terms *saint* and *Orisha* are often used interchangeably within Santeria. The common bond between the Lukumí Orisha and the Catholic saints has become a part of Cuba's religious culture. It was originally referred to by the Spanish as **Santería** (literally, the **Way of the Saints**), a derisive term meant to mock the seeming overdevotion of adherents to the saints and their perceived neglect of God. The slaves' Christian masters, you see, would not allow them to practice their various west African religions. The slaves pioneered a way around this by masking the Orishas as Christian saints while maintaining their original identities. The masters meanwhile thought their slaves had become good Christians whose lips praised the saints. In reality, they had found a way to continue their traditional practices.

Santeria have several overlapping ways of classifying orishas. Spirits are divided according to their nature in roughly two categories, that of the hot and the cool. Shango, Ogun, and Babaluaye work through the fire of lightning, the forge, and fever to heat up the ashe or reality or vital force of the adherent to force change in the world. Osanyin, Inle, and Oshun cool through leaves, herbs, fresh water, calming the hot head which impedes the devotee's vision. There are orishas of the sky and orishas of the earth. There are orishas of the forest and orishas of the town. Finally, there is Elegua, the restless outsider between the worlds. His randomness and unpredictability disrupts our lives. It's through this disruption people learn the meaning of their lives.

Today, Lukumí is practiced in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and in Latin American population centers in the United States such as Florida, New York, and California. Most Lukumi or Santeria are Hispanic, dark, Cuban or African, but the Santeria I knew were far from stereotypical in that regard. They were big, bluff English

and French stock with names like Harrison and Artigan. The men tended toward trimmed beards and suspenders, the women favoring headscarves or neckerchiefs and peasant blouses. Some wore denim skirts refashioned from old workshirts. Their farms were uniformly neat, tidy, small, with clear divisions between livestock and crops. Seldom did the two mix, although there was often little distinction between where the livestock could roam and the living spaces for people. On one of my first visits, I had to battle a rooster for sitting space at the table.

Livestock are of great importance for the Santeria. Lukumí ritual is highly secretive and transmitted orally. There are a few books, mostly written by ethnographers or students of religions, and to their credit they take pains to provide as balanced a view of Sanerian practices as possible. Because their practices include animal offering, ecstatic dance, and sung invocations to the Orishas. Chickens are the most common form of sacrifice; their blood is offered to the Orisha, sometimes in a bowl, sometimes on the body of the devotee. Drum music and dancing induce a trance state in specific participants who are possessed by an Orisha who then speaks through them. One's ancestors, or *egun*, are often the intercessors between one and the Orisha, and thus are held in high esteem in Lukumí.

This is why many Santeria keep a low profile. Animal sacrifice is illegal in many states, primarily New York, Florida and California, and some ordinances have been adopted in response to perceived local Santeria activity. Many animal rights activists take issue with the Lukumí practice, claiming that it is cruel. But followers of Lukumí point out that the killings are conducted in the same manner as many food animals are slaughtered and, far from being needlessly sadistic, the priests are charged with using

humane ways to kill the animals. I can attest that the sacrifices I was privileged to watch were quicker and probably less painful than the hogs and cattle I've seen slaughtered by farmers. Additionally, the animal is cooked and eaten afterwards. Of course, the similarities between Lukumí sacrifice and other forms of slaughter for food may be of little comfort to animal rights supporters or activists who are vegetarian. In 1993, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case *Church of Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah* that animal cruelty laws targeted specifically at Santeria were unconstitutional. The practice has seen no significant legal challenges since then. It may go without saying, but Lukumi does not advocate human sacrifice.

*

I have not known any practioners of Vodun or Voodoo. Or at least, I'm not aware of having known any. Again, it is of necessity a secretive religion. The term **Voodoo** (which is an Anglicization of the actual word: its original name is **Vodun, a Fon-Ewe word meaning "spirit"**, in Benin, and **Vodou** or other phonetically equivalent spellings in Haiti, and **Vudu** in the Dominican Republic) is applied to the branches of a West African ancestor-based spiritist-animist religious tradition whose primary roots are among the Fon-Ewe peoples of Benin in West Africa. Vodun today is the national religion of 7 million people.

In addition to the Fon or Dahomeyan tradition (Dahomey is the original Fon name for what is now Benin) which has remained in Africa, related traditions put down roots in the New World during the days of the transatlantic African slave trade. In addition to Benin, African Vodun and its descendant practices may be found in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil, Ghana, Haiti, Cape Verde, and Togo. In the

Americas it has fused with Catholicism. Among Cubans, the Fon tradition is known as *La Regla Arara*. Among former slaves in Brazil the tradition has given rise to Jeje Vodun. In any of these cultures, Vodun remains an ancient religion directly derived from prehistoric belief systems. Its "primitivism" generates exceptional interest in the paleoanthropological field which has sought to find in it some of the assumed practices of what's known as the ur, or first, religion.

Vodun, like Santeria, is a theistic, magical form of animism—that is, a spirituality which treats the world as a community of living persons, only some of whom are human—that developed among West African tribes predating historical times. The cultural area of the Fon, Gun, Mina and Ewe peoples share common metaphysical conceptions centering on a dual cosmology. The divine principle resides in the God-Creator (whose name can vary but often called Mawu) and the Gods or Actors or Voduns, who are the sons of the Creator. The God-Creator is the cosmogonical principle and does not trifle with the mundane, while the Voduns are the Gods which actually govern on daily, territorial issues.

The Pantheon of the Voduns is quite large and complex. There are seven direct sons of Mawu who are interethnic and relate to natural phenomena, historical or mythical individuals, dozens of ethnic Voduns, or the defenders of a certain clan or tribe, as well as the modern Voduns which derive mostly from Ghana. West African or Beninese Vodun is similar to Haitian Vodou in its emphasis on the ancestors; however, each family of spirits has its own specialized hereditary clergy. The African spirits include Mami Wata, the water goddesses; Legba, a virile young man in contrast with the old man

persona he takes in Haiti; Gu, ruler of iron and smithcraft; Sakpata, who rules diseases; and many other spirits distinct in their own way to West Africa.

Totalitarian regimes in West Africa have tried without success to suppress Vodun, but in Africa Vodun is practised by over 30 million people. This is quite distinct from Haitian Vodun, called **Sèvis Gine** or "African Service." Haitian Vodou also has strong elements from the Ibo and Kongo peoples of Central Africa as well as the Yoruba, although many different peoples are represented in the liturgy of the Sèvis Gine, as are the Taíno Indians, the original peoples of the island Hispaniola (this is the island Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic). Haitian Creole forms of Vodou exist as well in parts of Cuba, the United States—notably in New Orleans—and in other places that Haitian immigrants dispersed to over the years. It is similar to other African-diasporic religions such as Lukumi or Regla de Ocha or any of a number of religions that evolved among descendants of transplanted Africans in the Americas.

Haitian Vodouisants believe in a single god who is the creator of all, referred to as "Bondye," from the French "Bon Dieu" or "Good God", but distinguished from the god of the whites but, as in Santeria. often considered the same God as the Roman Catholic Church talks about. Bondyè is distant from his/her/its creation however, and so it is the spirits or the "mysteries", "saints", or the "angels" to whom the Vodouisant turns for help, as well as to his ancestors. The Vodouisant worships a God and serves its spirits, who are treated with honor and respect as one should treat the elder members of a household. There are said to be twenty-one nations or "nanchons" of spirits, also sometimes called "lwa-yo". The spirits also come in "families" with a common surname, like Ogou, or Ezili, or Azaka or Ghede. For instance, "Ezili" is a family, while Ezili Dantor and Ezili

Freda are individual spirits within that family. Reflecting traditional sectioning of roles, each family has its own area of influence. The Ogou family are soldiers, the Ezili govern the feminine spheres of life, while the Azaka govern agriculture, and the Ghede govern the spheres of death and fertility. In Dominican Vodou, there is also an Agua Dulce or "Sweet Waters" family, which encompasses all Amerindian spirits. There are literally hundreds of lwa or individual family members.

Haitian Vodou, like Santeria, divide its spirits between the hot and the cool. Cool spirits are the Rada category, and hot spirits are the Petwo category. Rada spirits are familial and come from Africa, but Petwo spirits are native to Haiti and are more demanding and require more attention to detail. Both can be dangerous if angry or upset, but neither is "good" or "evil" in relation to the other.

Everyone has spirits, and each person's relationship with her particular spirit is said to "own her head." However, each person may have many lwa, and the one that owns one's head, or the "met tet", may or may not be the most active spirit in a person's life. In serving the spirits, the Vodouisant seeks to achieve harmony with his individual nature and the world around him as manifested in personal power and resourcefulness in dealing with the conflicts of life. Part of this harmony is membership in and the maintenance of relationships in family and community. A Vodou house or society is organized along the metaphor of an extended family; initiates are considered the "children" of their initiators, with the full sense of hierarchy and mutual obligation that the term implies.

Most Vodouisants, however, are not initiated, or "bosal," however; initiation is not required to serve one's spirits. There are clergy in Haitian Vodou whose responsibility

is the preservation of rituals and songs and who maintain the relationship between the spirits and the community as a whole (though some of this is the responsibility of the community as well). These clergy are entrusted with leading the service of all of the spirits of their lineage. Priests are referred to as "Houngans" and priestesses as "Manbos". Below the houngans and manbos are the hounsis, initiates who act as assistants during ceremonies and are dedicated to their own individual mysteries. One does not serve just any lwa but only the ones they "have," according to destiny or nature. The spirits an individual "has" may be revealed at a ceremony, in a reading, or in dreams. But all Vodouisants serve the spirits of their own blood ancestors, and this important aspect of Vodun practice is often glossed over by commentators who fail to understand its significance. The ancestor cult is in fact the basis of Vodun religion, and many lwa, like Agasou, a former king of Dahomey, are ancestors who have been raised up to divinity.

The cultural values embraced by Vodun center on honor and respect—to God, to the spirits, to the family and society, and to oneself. There is also a notion of relative propriety—what is appropriate to someone for whom Dambala Wedo owns her head may differ from someone whose head is owned by Ogou Feray. One spirit is very cool and the other is very hot. Coolness overall is valued, as are the abilities to protect oneself and one's own if necessary. Love and support within the Vodun family is given the greatest and most important consideration. Generosity of spirit and materiality in giving to the community and to the poor is also an important value. One's blessings come through the community, and one must be willing to give back to it in turn. Since Vodun is so community orientated, there are no "solitaries" in Vodun, only people separated

geographically from their elders and house. A person without a relationship of some kind with elders fails to practice Vodon.

Haitian Vodon religion is an ecstatic rather than a fertility based tradition. The tradition does not discriminate against gay men or lesbians. In fact, according to my sources, there are hounfos or “temples” in Haiti whose clergy are themselves gay males or lesbian. According to Vodon practice, the sexual orientation or gender identity and expression of a practitioner is of no concern in ritual. It is seen rather as the way God made a person. The spirits help each person to simply be the person that she is.

*

In her book whose title provided the title of this sermon, Zora Neale Hurston describes Haiti of the 1930s as an island of superstition and corruption—much the same way as Graham Greene 30 years later would describe it in his novel *The Comedians*—but whose people remain beautiful and hopeful and loving. “The survivors” she calls them.

“Parlay cheval ou.” “Tell my horse.” This is often the first phrase coming from the mouth of a possessed adherent in both Santaria and Vodun. “Tell my horse,” the possessing spirit intones, “I have come from the other side, from death or the place of the spirits or the great unknown or however you would like to think of it, and this is my information for the person who I am riding. Parlay cheval ou. Tell my horse.”

We seldom think of ourselves as horses, as beasts of burden, as transporters, but we are. At least for our religions. Like the saints or the ancestors, religions mount and ride us. They possess us, sometimes covering our eyes and digging in their heels, and they point us in a direction we perhaps hadn’t thought we would go in. Metaphysical

Willie Shoemakers, a religion might head us in the direction of affirmation and glory or, as happens sometimes in Haiti, off the nearest cliff.

It is not always a bad relationship, but it remains a relationship in which we are not the dominant partner, the guide. We aren't supposed to do the heavy thinking, just the heavy lifting. There is something fundamentally freeing in that relationship. Rather than having to determine the outcome of our actions, we become the carriage. Instead of the end, we become the means.

You may be expecting at this point for me to say that this is the case in all religions, in the harried push toward social ascension of Judaism, in the thrust for personal salvation, sometimes over communal safety, of Christianity, or in the glee of the "convert or die" brand of Islam, but not in Unitarian Universalism. But that isn't the case. Religion is religion is religion, and if we would claim for UU its place as a faith we must also accept its place as a rider of us.

Hurston writes, "Gods always behave like the people who make them." This is not necessarily bad for us and may even be in some ways good for us. Major figures were often ridden by an ideal. Moses was possessed of a vision of the Promised Land. Jesus was ridden by the vision of religion as a way of love rather than of law. The Buddha found himself the bearer of the vision of the Way. Ghandi, Henry David Thoreau, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul Wellstone—each of these people were possessed of a vision of the world and they were ridden by their vision to its end. The end may not have been envisioned by them, it may in fact have been something unforeseen by them, but it was in the end a vision of religious intensity, a vision of a world seen from elsewhere.

Parlay cheval ou. Tell my horse. What will your horse tell you?