



DOS NARIZONES NO SE PUEDEN BESAR TRAYECTORIAS, USOS Y PRÁCTICAS DE LA TRADICIÓN ORISHA EN YUCATÁN

by Nahayelli Beatriz Juárez Huet
(A Book Review)



This book is probably the first ethnography of Orisha religious practices on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. The author, a researcher at the Yucatán Unit of the Centre for Research and Higher Studies (CIESAS), has not tried to create a lineal history of the development of Orisha practices but rather look at the fluidity of the beliefs, rituals, and practices of its practitioners along the travel circuit that

encompasses Yucatán, Cuba, Mexico City, and Nigeria. The main unit of analysis in this book seems to be the Orishas. The book has an introduction, four chapters, and a short discussion section. The introduction explains the methodological point of view of the author, which centers on the flow of meanings and changing contexts. The first chapter is about Orishas and their relation to ethnicity and race definitions. The second chapter is a historical view of Africans and their descendants in Mexico alongside their contributions to Mexican religious plurality. The last two chapters are ethnographic, describing the ways in which Orishas were present at different places and settings during the author's fieldwork in Mexico City and in the and in the Yucatán Peninsula, which encompasses the states of Campeche, Yucatán and Quintana Roo.

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As per Juárez Huet's description, in different places Orishas are considered entities that can operate miracles if they are asked correctly by the right people, or the incarnation of energies or forces that can change the destiny of people, or mediators between the worlds of the living and the dead. In Cuba, Brazil, and Puerto Rico, Orishas took on the aspect and some characteristics of Catholic saints. In Yucatán, Orisha-related beliefs and practices often replicate, to some extent, the Cuban varieties; but they also mix with other types of esoteric beliefs—including various Christian religions, indigenous forms of healing, and diverse facets of the New Age movement (e.g. yoga, tarot, palmistry, and crystal healing). In particular, *lfa* is a divination method associated with the Orishas and with initiation in Orisha-related religious groups. Because of the diversity of understandings of who or what the Orishas are, belief in and worship of them can be part of organized religions in some cases, but they can also be practices that have been incorporated by practitioners of other major religions or practices associated with folk medicine and the casting of spells. Juárez Huet found that in Nigeria Orisha-related beliefs and practices are constructed as part of Yoruba history and ethnicity, but the people who practice them do not claim necessarily to be Yoruba. In the United States, religious and magical practices related to Orishas are claimed as a part of cultural patrimony of specific ethnic groups. In Mexico (and in the Yucatán Peninsula in particular), this does not seem to be the case: anyone may either become part of a group practicing rituals or form of divination associated with Orishas. Also, in Nigeria, Orisha beliefs and rituals coexist within other major religions, including Catholicism and Islam, to which they have been fully integrated. In Mexico, instead, they are recognized as relatively extraneous but still adaptable to other major religions, including Catholicism and other Christian religions. Juárez Huet writes that it is inaccurate to see Orisha-related elements as having originated historically in Africa or within a specifically Yoruba ethnicity; rather, different beliefs and rituals developed through constant flows of back and forth migration between Africa and the Americas. This flow resembles the way music has travelled since the sixteenth century between continents, so that today it is practically impossible to think of European music with-

out taking the Americas into account, and vice versa. The same applies to Orisha-related beliefs.

Juárez Huet finds puzzling the paucity of scholarship surrounding the historical importance of descendants from Africans in Mexico, particularly in the Yucatán Peninsula. There were, she explains, perhaps as many Africans as Europeans during the first years of colonial Yucatán. However, first the conquistadors and later on the historians saw the indigenous Maya as the main *other* in their writings and observations. The cultural legacy of Africans and their descendants to Yucatecan culture has been under-reported and under-analyzed. She tells us that, even today, the categories of the national census are not registering accurately enough the many religions of ethnic or of African origin. It is unfortunate that the table (on page 122), where Juárez Huet provides numbers of ethnic and African religions in Mexico, is not analyzed in the text, since there are apparently over 34,000 religions outside the larger and official ones. It would have been good to know what “religion” means here, because reading this large number leads to the perception that each person practicing something other than one of the larger, official religions has invented a cult or church of his or her own. Also, it would have been important to know how many from among these several thousand religions include rites or practices related to beliefs in Orishas. Juárez Huet writes that the beliefs and religious practices African slaves and other Africans brought with them to Mexico (and the Yucatán Peninsula in particular) might have recombined with existing divinatory and magical practices of both the Europeans and the original inhabitants, but she adds that there are some practices still in use today—such as those called Palo Monte, which in Cuba is called Regla de Palo Monte and refers to the religion known as Santería both in Cuba and Yucatan—where the Orishas have metamorphosed with Catholic Saints and hold powers related both to their Catholic and Orisha associations.

The two last chapters look at the presence of Orishas in the beliefs and practices of Mexicans and especially of people living in the Yucatán Peninsula. Most of the ethnographic examples are from Mexico City and locations in the states of Yucatán and Quintana Roo. Merida is Yucatán’s most important cultural capital, and the historical

and affective links between Merida and Cuba have been profusely documented in the history and ethnography of the peninsula. Here, Juárez Huet traces contemporary belief in Orishas to the popularity of Cuban musicians and dancers in Yucatán in the 1990s, especially in the city of Merida. During that decade, there were several bars and restaurants that began to offer “Cuban shows” featuring Cuban musicians and dancers, and this meant that hundreds of artists came to the Yucatán Peninsula—and some of them took their shows to Mexico City and other parts of the country. The Santería religion, where the Orishas are identified with Catholic saints, travelled with many of them, and some of these artists managed to stay in Mexico. An interesting aspect of at least some types of Santería is the belief in consulting with the spirits of the dead. Juárez Huet points at the long tradition of spirit mediums in Yucatán, where they were fashionable among the social elites of the entire peninsula at the end of the 1800s and the first decades of the 1900s. She says that there have been very few studies of what happened after that, but she believes that the practice of mediumship did not disappear completely, so it was easily re-activated in more recent forms of spirit-belief practices, including *Espiritismo Mariano* (a form of mediumship generally associated with some branches of the Catholic Church in Mexico) and with some of the Cuban-derived forms of Santería now practiced in Mexico. *Ifa* divination, in its Cuban forms, is thought to necessitate a hierarchy among its practitioners, so that only a few, usually placed in the higher rungs of the priesthood, can invoke and talk to the spirits of the dead.

Juárez Huet gives us a sketch of the life of an artist who came to Merida as a dancer then moved to Mexico City before emigrating to the United States. She said that she felt right away that Merida was her home, and when she tired of working too hard and enjoying life too little in the US, she came back to start a family in Yucatán. She is now one of the most recognized practitioners of Santería, and she has converted many Meridians to her beliefs. Juárez Huet also gives us examples of young people practicing yoga and Eastern forms of spirituality who have tried *Ifa* divination at different times for specific purposes related to either health or magical beliefs. These people treat esoteric beliefs and divination as different options within a larger market

and have not been interested in gaining any further knowledge of the beliefs and rites associated with the Orishas or Santería.

Through ethnographic examples, the author shows that the belief of the Orishas are neither a unified concept nor a homogeneous religion. The book is rather complicated for readers who are not specialists in Orisha religion, but the author does provide a useful glossary for many of the unfamiliar terms and concepts. All things considered, the book is a welcome addition to the ethnography of the Yucatán Peninsula; it certainly paves the way for other studies that can focus more specifically on particular locations or groups to broaden our understanding of religious practices in Yucatán.

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WORKS CITED

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