

# Orisha Worshipers

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## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

**Required Daily Observances.** There are no required daily rituals. Personal prayer and sacrifice to one's Orisha is encouraged.

**Required Weekly Observances.** There are no required weekly rituals. However, if it is the practice of the Religious Services Department to accommodate requests for weekly worship and study, *it would be appropriate to schedule a weekly community-based meeting of Orisha seekers/devotees and practitioners.* Because the rituals reflect the cultures of the regions from which practitioners and seekers have descended, the practices, rituals, and customs vary even from household to household.

Community-based celebrations generally center on the worship or study of a particular Orisha to whom household members are dedicated. Fruit is frequently offered to the Orisha. Drum music and dancing are a form of prayer and sometimes bring about an altered state of consciousness – a trance state – in initiated priests and priestesses. In the trance state, the worshiper becomes spiritually possessed and channels the Orisha, giving the community and individuals information, perform healings, etc.

Household rituals are public and open to all who are invited to attend. One's ancestors, *egun*, are held in high esteem in the Orisha worshipers' traditions. Thus, all ceremonies and rituals in the various manifestations of the tradition begin with paying homage to one's ancestors.

In correctional facilities, worship or devotion dedicated to one or more particular Orishas are best observed by individuals. Scheduled group services are open to all, for the benefit of all Orisha worshipers, regardless of their particular religious and cultural differences based on their geographic and cultural origin. Seekers of various cultures may wish to participate in Orisha worship services and studies out of curiosity about the unknown, or about spiritist practices. While participation is encouraged, seekers or visitors must honor the traditions and practices of the practitioners and observe or participate respectfully, without imposing contrary practices or beliefs, or disrupting the services.

**Required Occasional Observances.** Rites of membership initiation are only performed by Orisha-worshiping priests and priestesses. These rituals are *ordinarily not performed within the institution*, except when a priest or priestess from the community is present. Rituals may never include blood or monetary offerings. Monetary or barter fees may not be charged for performance of rituals.

Nevertheless, there is great significance attached to the gathering of the household to honor Oludumare, the transcendent, one, great God who rules and sustains the universe. Worshipers also honor the Orishas, the demigods or saintly manifestations of Oludumare, and their deceased ancestors. Orisha-worshiping religions are religions of practice rather than belief. In the wider community these gatherings would generally occur within households or small communities of practitioners and visitors.

**Divination Rituals and Drumming Ceremonies.** These two rituals will be the ones most commonly observed in prisons. Many individuals practice these divination rituals and are subject to possession trances even though these rituals are usually performed by an Orisha-worshiping priest.

**Religious Holy Days.** Holy day observances are unique for each Orisha, and generally observed by individual seekers or devotees on the feast day honoring the particular Roman Catholic saint whom the Orisha embodies. This list includes the major Orishas honored in the United States, according to scholars and practitioners. Because of the importance of culture and geography in defining the worship, there will never be a comprehensive list of Orishas – one should not conclude that other Orishas are not legitimate objects of worship or occasions for celebration.

- Ogun (January 29): Saint Peter.
- Oya (February 2): Candelaria/ Saint Teresa.
- Ochagrinan (March 19): Saint Joseph.
- Aguema (May 5): Our Lady of Immaculate Conception.
- Orichaoko (May 15): Saint Isodore.
- Ochosi (June 16): Saint Norbert.
- Ellegua (June 13): Saint Anthony of Padua.
- Aganyu-Sola (July 25): Saint Christopher.
- Yewa (August 11): Saint Clare.
- Yemaya (September 7): Our Lady of Regla.
- Obatala, sometimes named Osshun (September 8-12): Virgin of Mercy, Protector of Cuba (September 24).
- Los Ibeyi (September 26): Ss. Cosmas and Damian.
- Orunla (October 4): Saint Francis Assisi.
- Dada (October 7): Our Lady of the Rosary.
- Inle (October 24): Archangel Raphael.
- Chango (December 4): Saint Barbara.
- Babalu-Aye (December 17): Saint Lazarus.

- Osain (December 31): Saint Sylvester/Saint Ambrose.

The feasts of *Obatala*, *Ellegua*, and *Chango* are common days of celebration. The Orisha-worshipping community may request to have their ceremonial meal on one of these days. According to the legends (*patakis*) of Orisha worshipers, Obatala is the oldest and wisest of the Orishas. It would be good practice to determine with the Orisha-worshipping community which days the group would prefer to observe for their group ceremonial meal. It would be best to allow them to discuss this and reach a conclusion about the birthday of the Orisha they desire to observe. The date should be set at the beginning of the calendar (or fiscal) year, in accordance with local practice.

## RELIGIOUS ITEMS

The religious items used by Orisha worshipers vary from group to group and devotee to devotee. Most devotees wear a necklace or necklaces (*collares*, also known as *Elekes*) representing the colors pleasing to their orishas. Coconut rinds or cowrie shells and a straw mat are used as divination tools. A common divination tool is known as *Okuele*, a larger size necklace with 6 or 8 rinds of coconut.

The best practice with respect to religious items in a correctional setting may be to authorize the number, nature, size, and value of Orisha worshipers' religious items, rather than to specifically name them. The Orisha-worshipping community or the devotee may use up to a specified number of congregate items that will be stored in the chapel; each devotee may retain in his/her property a specified number of approved personal religious items. Personal items are ordinarily derived from materials at hand, natural goods used as offerings for the gods; e.g., fruit, grains, seeds, vegetables, flowers, 4 coconut rinds and 21 cowrie shells; scented water (non-alcoholic cologne or after-shave splash), oil or lotion, honey, molasses; a bowl with a lid. A paper image of the Orisha, in the form of a saint, should be authorized.

**Personal Religious Items.** The main personal religious identifier for any Orisha worshiper is the necklace(s) made in the colors of the Orisha under whose protection s/he is initiated. The colors and numbers associated with each Orisha are listed in a separate chart. Inmates may retain up to seven necklaces in their possession, wearing only one at a time.

A Santeria practitioner may have contact with his/her *babalao* or priest. A regular practice of a *babalao* is to use the tools of divination to make a "reading" on behalf of the Santero. Santero do not have to be present for a reading to take place. The inmate may receive a "recipe" from his/her *babalao* containing a spiritual cleansing/bath (*baño*) that the Santero needs to take – a personal ceremony of purification that can take place with dry herb smudging or a shower. The elements for a shower cleansing may be obtained through an SPO with a Botanica.

<p><b>Security note:</b> It is recommended that the accommodation of a bath for a practitioner not exceed twice per year. Correctional staff must be mindful of any safety and security concerns related to Botanica elements before making an SPO purchase. When the bath is accommodated, the inmate must provide contact information for the Santero priest or Babalao who gave the "prescription" so the chaplain can legitimize the request. It is not a legitimate religious practice for an inmate to arbitrarily choose from a catalog what he/she believes is needed for the bath.</p>
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Personal religious items may include any items listed above, but are not limited to those examples. Most

personal items or similar items are available in the commissary or can be collected from the compound (e.g., small pebbles, sticks).

**Security note:** Personal religious items *may not* include: Amulets, live or dead animals or animal parts, birds, or insects; tobacco (in any form); blood; rosaries or necklaces (*elekes*) made of any material other than plastic; spoiled or decayed flowers, fruit, vegetables, or meat; sticks larger than a standard pencil; candles.

**Congregate Religious Items.** Congregate items always include:

- A small altar (*trono*)/shrine(*boveda*).
- Up to three drums or *bata* (sacred ritual drums): the *iya* – the mother drum, the *itotele* – the middle-sized drum, and the *okonkolou* – the small drum.
- Beaded gourds (*shakeres*).
- Colorful flower arrangements (plastic may be substituted for live flowers).
- 1 or 2 cigars.
- *Cascarrilla* (egg shell powder).
- Smoked fish powder.
- *Manteca de corajo*.
- Incenses.
- 4 coconut rinds.
- 21 cowrie shells.
- White-cloth covering for the altar/shrine.
- 9 water glasses.
- A shell or dish for burning tobacco.
- Inexpensive small statues of the saints (plaster of paris or plastic).
- Small bells attached to colored ribbons and fixed to a staff or pole the size of a broomstick.
- A small amount of citrus-scented water (to take the place of alcohol-based “Florida Water”).

Devotees may add other materials at hand, usually natural items of sacrifice, to the altar to please their respective Orishas.

**Security note:** The cigar is one of many divination tools used (most often by the high priest). The ritual involves the burning of two cigars, one to the Orisha and the other for participants as a method of lifting prayers to the Orisha. In the ceremony, it is considered sacrilegious for participants to inhale cigar smoke. Cigar smoke is also used in a smudging ritual. From a correctional perspective, cutting one cigar in half and offering half to the Orisha and the other half to the participants meets the ritual requirements.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR MEMBERSHIP

The Orisha-worshipping religions are traditions that require initiation rituals for membership. There are degrees of membership; each is conferred during a different ritual. As the members progress from one initiation to another, they are also taught, or learn from observation of their godparents, more of the secrets of the religion.

The basic ceremonies are the initiation to Necklaces and Warriors, Hand of Orula, Crowning, and the Knife. Other secret rituals are performed, but those not initiated do not know the rituals or responsibilities of these initiations. Membership requirements are complex and have great bearing on the practice of Orisha worshipers in prisons. Secret rituals are prohibited, as are any practices that include a prohibited act. This is worthy of mention because of the secrecy imbedded in the religious practices and the custom of animal sacrifice for certain rituals.

A person who has received the first rite of initiation is an *aleyo*. He/she has received the initiation of the necklaces. Other common names for this initiation are derived from Spanish and African dialects, *Los Collares* and *Elekes*, respectively. The ritual brings the initiate into a religious or spiritual family, placing him/her under the protection and authority of the priest and priestess, the godparents who brought the initiate to the Orisha family. After the initiation, the *aleyo* may observe or participate in other public rituals but remains under the guidance and protection of his/her godparents.

The initiation into the warriors (Elegua, Ochosi, and Oggun) is often conferred at the same time or soon after the *Los Collares*. Women ordinarily do not confer that initiation on men. Another common initiation is the initiation into the Seven African Powers (Elegua, Obatala, Oggun, Chango, Yemaya, Oshun, and Orunmilla). Devotees from Cuba often replace Orunmilla with Babalu-Aye. The Seven African Powers are consecrated into one *eleke*.

Unless an inmate has come into prison having already received the first initiation rites, he/she will have to delay the public initiations until release, because “clergy” of any faith tradition are never authorized to exercise their religious or spiritual leadership over other inmates during incarceration. However, this should not prevent devotees from observing and studying the practices of Orisha worship while in prison. In the event that a regular contractor or volunteer believes his/her devotee requires a further initiation without delay, initiation rituals should be conferred by the volunteer or contractor in a private setting, under direct supervision. Whether actually initiated or not, many inmates believe they have a kinship with particular Orisha families. Unless there is a security threat (e.g., fear of gang identification), inmates should be allowed to wear one colored necklace bearing the color/s pleasing to their Orisha.

**Total Membership.** The number of initiated Orisha worshipers is uncertain because the tradition is a secret “family-based” practice, with no central repository of records. Scholars estimate there may be as many as 100 million practitioners in the United States and Central and South America.

## **MEDICAL PROHIBITIONS**

There are no documented medical prohibitions. Inmates may choose to participate in healing rituals in conjunction with their medical treatments (just as other traditions pray for healing), but the healing ritual must never take the place of professional medical treatment.

## **DIETARY STANDARDS**

There are no documented, required, or recommended dietary laws or customs. It is sometimes customary to consume food products offered as sacrifices to the Orisha after completion of the sacrificial ritual.

## **BURIAL RITUALS**

There are no documented burial rituals, but there are local customs such as a bell ringing to notify the

community of a death. Most in the tradition believe in some form of reincarnation. There is a 9-day grieving ritual that consists of reading prayers and singing a combination of African, Ladino, and Christian hymns to offer spiritual aid to the deceased. Daily, a small amount of water and a candle are moved closer and closer to the heavens and final judgement. An inmate Orisha worshiper may practice this ritual privately in his/her area during the 9-day grieving period (using only the water).

## SACRED WRITINGS

Orisha worshipers have no written canon or formal texts. The tradition is passed on orally to initiates. Many cherish as sacred the Bible or a book of the saints. At the beginning of every year a group of babalaos and Ifa priests and priestesses meet to make a special ceremony to obtain “La letra del año” (the letter of the year). This document contains emphases, directions, and specifications for the entire year.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The structure is hierarchical within each family or unit, but there is no overall structure that defines or describes the customs, beliefs, and practices of all Orisha worshipers. The family-like structure includes the Orisha’s high priests/high priestesses, priests and priestesses, the madrina and padrina (godparents), the devotees, and the initiates.

**Location of Headquarters.** There is no headquarters or central location for the collection of information or determination of general practices. New York, New Jersey, Louisiana, Puerto Rico, and Miami are all centers of Orisha worshipers because of their large concentrations of North African and Caribbean immigrants.

**Contact Office/Person.** None. There is no centralized authority, but large communities exist in the Miami, New York, and Los Angeles areas.

ORISHA	SAINT DAY	COLORS	OFFERINGS/FOODS
Ellegua, aka Eshu/Exu/ Esu-Elegbara	Anthony: 06-13	red; black; white	male chickens, rum, cigars, coconuts, popcorn, smoked fish, <b>toys, candy, fruits</b>
Orunmila, aka Orunla	Francis: 10-04	green; yellow	<b>nuts</b> , yams, black hens
Obatatla, aka Orisanla/Oxala	Our Lady of Mercy: 09-24	white	<b>cotton</b> , cascarilla, yams, white doves, <b>coconut</b> , milk, rice—all white foods
Chango, aka Xango/ Sango	Barbara: 12-04	red; white	<b>apples, bananas</b> , red rooster, rams, okra, annise candy
Oggun, aka Ogun, Ogum	Peter: 06-29	green; black; white	roosters, pigeons, green plantains, rum, cigars, <b>toys</b> , white <b>beans</b>

Ochosi	Norbert: 06-06	violet, red green, blue	roosters, pigeons, <b>fruit</b> , grenadine
Aganyu	Christopher: 11-16	red; green	roosters, fruit, <b>unsalted crackers</b> , palm oil, goat
Babalu-Aye, aka Sonponno, Obaluae	Lazarus: 12-17	sackcloth color, lt. blue, royal purple	grains, garlic, <b>onions</b> , pigeons, all types of <b>beans</b> , <b>popcorn</b>
Yemaya, aka Yemoja, Iemanjá	Our Lady of Regla: 09-07	blue; white	<b>watermelon</b> , fruits, cane syrup, she-goats, ducks, hens
Oshun, aka Osun, Oxum	Our Lady of Charity: 09-08	white; yellow	<b>honey</b> , pumpkins, white wine, rum <b>cakes jewelry</b> , hens, <b>fruits</b>
Oya, aka Yansa, Oia-lansa	Our Lady of Candelaria: 02-02	maroon; all colors except black	eggplant, hens, she-goats, <b>rice</b> , <b>fruit</b> , <b>chocolate</b>



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## HISTORY

The roots of Orisha worship rest in Southwestern African indigenous rituals of the Yoruba-speaking tribes of Nigeria and Benin. The rituals were brought to the Americas (the Caribbean region, specifically Cuba) by enslaved people in the late 18th and early 19th century. There, West African beliefs and practices were syncretized with the Spanish Roman Catholic practices of the majority. The reason for this syncretization is not fully known. Some believe this occurred as the Nigerians struggled to maintain their own beliefs without the knowledge of their captors. Others believe that this mixture of religions and cultures is a general characteristic of African indigenous religions – that is, the tendency in Africa to incorporate the new into the old leads to subsuming Catholic beliefs and practices into their own. This occurred with slight variations during the same period throughout the Spanish-speaking Caribbean colonies, thus accounting for slight variances in beliefs and practices.

An African-American community called the *Gullah* inhabits a 500-mile stretch of lowlands between Jacksonville, South Carolina, and Jacksonville, Florida. This community has its roots in 18th-century Sierra Leone and the slave trade of the rice plantation owners of the sea island lowlands. Gullah community members have been very successful in preserving their culture, while other Black communities were more or less assimilated. The community is largely Protestant today, but has preserved many of spiritist traditions and incorporated these into Protestant rituals, much as Orisha worshipers have done with respect to Roman Catholic veneration of the saints. While Gullah practice the faith healing and divination rituals of their West African ancestors, they would not be likely to identify themselves as Orisha worshipers. There had always been some Orisha worshipers in the United States, but it is a mistake to believe that this phenomenon flourished among African slaves in the United States during this period.

Orisha worshipers were largely introduced to the United States as a result of the 1959 Cuban revolution and its aftermath. A small Afro-Caribbean Black Nationalist movement in the 1960's included the incorporation of ethnocentric religious rituals in an effort to retrieve a uniquely Black culture in the United States. It is often difficult to separate nationalist rituals from religious beliefs and practices, but an effort should always be made to protect the integrity of religious beliefs.

With the arrival of the Marielitos in 1980, however, Orisha worshipers got a strong foothold in the United States. Since then, the large Caribbean immigrant population in the South and in the New York area has resulted in significant growth of the religion. Laws protecting the freedom of religion (the Religious Freedom Restoration Act) also led to the strengthening of the status of the religion and ensured the right of Orisha worshipers to practice their faith without interference.

Scholar Mary Pat Fisher, in her 2006 book *Living Religions*, estimates there may be as many as 100 million worshipers in the United States and Latin America. This may be due in part to the New Age spiritualist movement, a postmodern amalgamation of nature-based religious beliefs and practices.

## **THEOLOGY**

The religion comprises certain African tribal beliefs. According to John Mason, author of *Black Gods: Orisa Studies in the New World*, adherents do not believe in the devil because their ancestral West African belief system is not derived from a dualistic theory – good v. evil or God v. the devil – but instead from a cosmological philosophy dealing with the nature of the universe.

There are five levels in the cosmology: Orisha worshipers believe in a creator who is called Olodumare or Olorun (God), the Orishas, human beings, human ancestors, and the lowest group, plants and animals. The cosmos is seen as containing forces of expansion and contraction that interacted in complex ways to create the universe. All things have positive aspects – *iré* – and negative aspects – *ibi*. Nothing is completely “good” or completely “evil”; all things have both *ire* and *ibi* qualities. Similarly, no action is universally “wrong” or “right,” but can only be judged within the context and circumstances in which it takes place. Each person is made up of both positive/constructive and negative/destructive impulses. His/her talents and facilities thus have potential for both positive and negative expression.

A great deal of attention is devoted to each individual’s striving to develop good character and doing good works (*asciento*). Good character is defined as doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do, not out of fear of retribution or as a way of seeking rewards. All humans have the potential for being good and blessed people, but also to make evil choices. The lifetimes of Orisha worshipers are spent perfecting themselves by making good choices. Orisha worshipers believe that the spirit lives on after death and may return as a reincarnated being.

Many beliefs and practices are respectfully secreted from non-believers. However, certain beliefs and traditions are disclosed to the public – particularly in postmodern times when the religion and spirituality of Orisha worshipers is being once again blended, this time with New Age beliefs and practices. Olodumare is the one god, creator. All other Orishas represent various manifestations of the one god. Each Orisha possesses and expresses a certain quality or characteristic of Olodumare. It is Olodumare who contains the universe and all that is in it. The Orishas are forces of nature (parts of god) who mediate between Olodumare and humanity. Humanity can commune directly with God by way of the trance/possession – always in a ritual setting.

Ebo, or sacrifice, is a broad concept including all types of sacrifices and offerings to the Orisha. These can include candles, fruit, candy, and various items or actions that may be appreciated by the Orisha. Ritual sacrifice is an important part of the beliefs and practices of Orisha worshipers. In the community, animals, particularly chickens, are often offered as sacrifices in situations such as serious illness or misfortune. Fruits and vegetables are used frequently and are pleasing to the particular Orishas.

## **RESOURCES**

As included in the body of this report, the requests of inmates for specific items must be considered on a case-by-case basis. Rules of thumb concerning religious items should be applied based on security, good order, and sanitation. Holy water, rosaries, crucifixes, and other blessed items provided for Roman Catholics or other Christian groups should not be used by Orisha worshipers. If Orisha worshipers require the use of similar items, separate unblessed holy water, crucifixes, rosaries, etc., should be

provided. To do otherwise would be disrespectful of the sacramentals of the Catholic tradition.

**Glossary:** Definitions or descriptions in this section are drawn from the glossaries of scholarly works by Brown, Clark, and Gonzalez-Wippler (see Bibliography).

**aberinkula:** unconsecrated drums



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**abure:** the brothers

**addele:** the 2-5 cowrie shells that are not read

**addimu:** small offering made to an orisha

**agogo:** a ritual bell used to call down the Orishas

**ana:** the spirit that lives in the sacred drums

**angel guardian/guardian angel:** one's primary Orisha, determined by a divination ritual performed by the priest and godparent

**ashe:** ritual power, energy, or blessing.

**aye:** the visual world

**babalawo:** high priest of Orula/Orunmila; the highest form of divination; the owner of Ifa

**babalosa:** male priest who has initiated other santeros

**bata:** consecrated ritual drums

**bembe:** drum ritual (also called *tambor*)



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**botanica:** retail store for the sale of supplies for the Orisha practices



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**boveda:** home altar (also called trono)



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**caracoles:** divination performed with cowrie shells  
**casa de Orisha:** House of the Orisha, a home shrine



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**cocos:** divination using four coconut shards which are cast on a mat to determine the yes-or-no wishes of the Orisha. The number of interior/exterior side of shards showing determines the answer. The practitioner can narrow the questions further and further to get a precise answer: the will of the Orisha – but the answer to each question has to be a yes/no/maybe possibility.



coconut1.gif

**collares:** necklaces; strands of colored beads representing the Orishas (also called *eleke* or *ilekes*)

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- cowrie shells:** small sea shells used for divination.
- dia de media:** middle day of initiation ritual when initiate is presented to the community
- diloggun:** divination system using 16 cowry shells
- ebo/ebbo:** spell; sacrifice, offering, or work given to the Orisha
- ebo/ebbo eje:** blood sacrifice (a prohibited act)
- ebo/ebbo:** offering of ...
- efun:** white chalk used in rituals
- egun:** spirits of deceased ancestors (also called **muertos**)
- elekes:** see collares, above
- emi:** breath; vital force
- epe:** a curse
- epo:** palm oil
- espiritista:** spiritist practitioner
- espiritismo:** Kardecian spiritism
- espiritismo:** spiritism of ...
- estera:** straw mat used for rituals and beneath offerings, should be at least the size of a place mat, but preferably the size of a beach mat

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- Florida water:** an alcohol-based citrus scented cologne popular among Orisha worshipers
- fundamento de santo:** the first or basic initiation, which is the foundation of the ascent
- guerrero:** a set of protective powers from Ellegua, Ogun, Ochosi, Osun, received at an early initiation ritual performed by a priest or babalawo
- ifa:** a fraternity of male diviners (not a separate religion); a ritual performed only by a babalawo; another name for the orisha Orula/Orunmila
- ilekes:** see *collares*, above
- ita:** a high-level divination ritual using cowrie shells always occurring after animal sacrifices – never appropriate in a correctional setting
- iyawo:** the new initiate; a spiritual newborn, who must observe certain strict customs for a year

following initiation

**madrina:** godmother; a priestess who initiates others and heads a house; to be a *madrina*, one must have already received the collares and the warrior ritual

**moyuba:** a chanted prayer praising god and honoring the deceased ancestors and the Orishas

**oba:** master of ceremonies for initiation and Ifa rituals (also called *oriate*)

**orisha:** a deity; each orisha controls a particular power and domain of the universe

**padrino:** godfather; see *madrina*, above

**pataki:** myth; legend; story (also called *historia*)

**pilon:** a ritual stool used in most initiation rituals

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**rama:** the geneological line of descent to which a particular household is attached

**rogacion:** head blessing ritual

**santero:** the priest or devotee of the Orisha, considered by some to be pejorative, especially Ifa members who call their priests *babalowas*

**santo:** the Catholic saints associated with the Orishas

**shekere:** beaded musical instrument made from a dried gourd

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**sopera:** lidded vessel used to contain the orishas' stones, shells, and icons (may also be called *Orisha pots*)

**tambor:** literally drum, more specifically the ritual drumming ceremony that includes drumming, dancing, and spirit possession

**tinaja:** a glazed water vessel for Olokun, the Orisha who has control over the deep (see *sopera*, above).

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**trono:** throne; an elaborate temporary canopy-like throne decorated with the cloth and leaves of the orishas' colors. Initiates are presented to the community under this lavish canopy. See boveda, above.

**Bibliography.** The following scholarly books may serve as guidance for further research into the requests of inmates. These books have also been referred to the library list.

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