

Similarities, adaptations, and syncretism of African religions in the Caribbean during the 18th and 19th centuries. Orisha religion of Trinidad: Worship of Shango in Trinidad and Tobago

Similitudes, adaptaciones y sincretismos de religiones africanas en el Caribe durante los siglos XVIII-XIX. Religión Orisha de Trinidad: Culto a Shangó en Trinidad y Tobago

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ABSTRACT

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, the transatlantic slave trade brought millions of enslaved Africans to the Caribbean, where they coexisted with indigenous peoples and European colonizers in a deeply multicultural space. In Trinidad and Tobago, this interaction gave rise to complex processes of adaptation and religious syncretism. African traditions, particularly the Yoruba religion, not only survived colonial repression but were also transformed upon encountering Catholicism and other cultural practices present in the Lesser Antilles. The colonial history of both islands—marked by disputes between Spain, France, Holland, and Great Britain—consolidated a plantation society based on African slave labor. In this context, the Yoruba worldview, centered on the worship of the orishas, found fertile ground for its reconfiguration in Trinidad. The orisha Shango, deity of thunder and justice, became a central figure in the local cult, to the point that in Trinidad, the term “Shango” came to designate the entire Orisha tradition. Despite the censorship and punishment imposed by the colonial authorities, religious practices preserved essential elements such as divination, spiritual possession, and the ritual use of herbs. Syncretism with Catholicism allowed it to survive: Shango was associated with Christian saints, and practices such as baptism were incorporated. These transformations did not imply a loss of identity but rather a strategic reconfiguration. The experience of Trinidad and Tobago shows that the African diaspora actively rebuilt its religious universe, adapting it to new social and political conditions without abandoning its original cultural matrix.

Keywords: Yoruba religion; Shango; religious syncretism; slavery; Trinidad and Tobago.

RESUMEN

Entre los siglos XVI y XIX, la trata transatlántica de esclavos llevó a millones de africanos esclavizados al Caribe, donde convivieron con los pueblos indígenas y los colonizadores europeos en un espacio profundamente multicultural. En Trinidad y Tobago, esta interacción dio lugar a complejos procesos de adaptación y sincretismo religioso. Las tradiciones africanas, en particular la religión yoruba, no solo sobrevivieron a la represión colonial, sino que también se transformaron al entrar en contacto con el catolicismo y otras prácticas culturales presentes en las Antillas Menores. La historia colonial de ambas islas—marcada por disputas entre España, Francia, Holanda y Gran Bretaña—consolidó una sociedad de plantaciones basada en la mano de obra esclava africana. En este contexto, la cosmovisión yoruba, centrada en el culto a los orishas, encontró un terreno fértil para su reconfiguración en Trinidad. El orisha Shango, deidad del trueno y la justicia, se convirtió en una figura central del culto local, hasta el punto de que en Trinidad el término «Shango» pasó a designar a toda la tradición orisha. A pesar de la censura y los castigos impuestos por las autoridades coloniales, las prácticas religiosas conservaron elementos esenciales como la adivinación, la posesión espiritual y el uso ritual de hierbas. El sincretismo con el catolicismo le permitió sobrevivir: Shango se asoció con santos cristianos y se incorporaron prácticas como el bautismo. Estas transformaciones no implicaron una pérdida de identidad, sino más bien una reconfiguración estratégica. La experiencia de Trinidad y Tobago muestra que la diáspora africana reconstruyó activamente su universo religioso, adaptándolo a las nuevas condiciones sociales y políticas sin abandonar su matriz cultural original.

Palabras clave: religión yoruba; Shango; sincretismo religioso; esclavitud; Trinidad y Tobago.

INTRODUCTION

During the centuries of capture and sale of slaves from Africa (between the 16th and 19th centuries), once they were brought to the Caribbean, cultural, social, and religious manifestations were shared among slaves, Native American/Caribbean indigenous peoples, and colonizers. Given this multicultural coexistence, the cults and religions originating in Africa, naturally brought with the slaves from that region, underwent a complex process of readaptation, syncretism, transformation, and enrichment with both the Christian religion and those of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and even other African slaves from different geographical areas of Africa.

In the multiculturalism of slaves, colonizers, and Caribbean natives, how did religious adaptations among Africans manifest themselves in a new continent and a new social and political reality? In the same vein, what were the syncretisms between African cults and religions and Catholicism in the 18th and 19th centuries in Trinidad and Tobago?

Below, we delve into a series of unknowns about the political and, above all, cultural and religious past of the island of Trinidad and Tobago. I will take a historiographical journey that will provide clues about the colonial development that opened its doors to the arrival of ships carrying African slaves. This will help to identify the religions and cults that came from Africa to the Caribbean via slaves in the 16th–18th centuries to study and understand the transformations and adaptations in African cults and religions in Trinidad and Tobago.

In addition to analyzing whether there were religious syncretisms between African religions and cults and Christianity in the 18th and 19th centuries in Trinidad and Tobago and, if so, what they were, I would like to invite reflection on the multiple transformations brought about by the colonization of the Lesser Antilles by England, Holland, and France. How do these differ in socio-cultural and political dynamics from the rest of the continent and the Greater Antilles from very early centuries?

DEVELOPMENT

From first contact to the union of a new colony

“From the first land he saw, only the tips of three hills appeared on the horizon. A miracle! There is the symbol of the Holy Trinity. In addition, so the island is christened: Trinidad”. On August 15, 1498, Columbus, on his third voyage from Europe to the gateway to the still untouched American continent, the Caribbean, encounters the island of Trinidad, the Araya Peninsula in Cumaná, Venezuela, and Margarita Island. Upon their arrival in Trinidad (until their settlement in 1592), the Spanish wanted to resort to the *encomienda* system, which had already proven successful in Hispaniola and Santo Domingo, to control the labor of the island’s indigenous people. The indigenous people resisted Christianization, which proved to be sufficient justification for the Spanish to enslave them. The resistance of the indigenous people also led the Spanish to “identify Caribs as fierce cannibals, connecting the terms *caribe*, *kalina*, and *canibale*”.

The island of Trinidad was uninhabited by settlers until 1592. Once the Spanish settlements were established, they gradually moved to neighboring islands in search of gold, whereas Franciscans, Dominicans, Capuchins, and others remained to continue the work of evangelization. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the indigenous population was extremely low. “The census of 1765 recorded an indigenous population of 1,277 out of a total population of 2,500”. From 1776 to 1783, efforts were made to increase the island’s population by selling land to immigrants. The French were most attracted to this offer, and so “French planters and their slaves moved to Trinidad and the country was transformed into a plantation society”. By 1797, not only had the population risen to 17,643, of whom 10,009 were African slaves but also “Britain captured Trinidad from Spain, and her possession was confirmed by the Treaty of Amiens in 1802”.

To discuss Trinidad and Tobago is to dissect the history of two neighboring territories that ended up uniting because of the wishes of Western countries. Having already visited the island of Trinidad, let us continue with a brief account of the colonization of Tobago and then discuss their union and subsequent development of slavery separately to finish contextualizing the political space in which religious coexistence between diverse cultural manifestations developed.

In 1498, Spain declared both Trinidad and Tobago as its colonies, and like Trinidad, Tobago was uninhabited by Europeans for a long period of time. In 1498, when Columbus first made contact, it was inhabited only by indigenous peoples known as Caribs and Arawaks. Subsequently, "Tobago remained uninhabited by Europeans until the first Dutch settlers arrived in 1628, soon to be followed by the British and the Courlanders from what is now a part of Latvia". The history of Tobago in terms of the dispute over control between the British and the French was quite long, lasting approximately fifty-two years. In "1763, the British finally claimed Tobago and settled there, establishing a plantation society. In 1781, the French captured Tobago, and the island changed hands between the two European powers three times until it was finally reclaimed as a British colony in 1815". Once European settlements were established, the indigenous population, which was engaged in hunting and horticulture, became virtually extinct.

Tobago, however, was a completely separate colony until 1889. In that year, the island was linked to Trinidad in a loose union, forming a new colony, Trinidad and Tobago; in 1898, Tobago was completely merged as a ward, or administrative district, of Trinidad and Tobago. Thus, the formation of a new colony under English rule gave rise to multiple territorial reconfigurations, a multilingual nation, and, in turn, the creation of an amalgam of cultural expressions that are extremely rich and full of peculiarities. The history of Trinidad and Tobago is marked by wars over territorial possession and European migrations but also by the African population that accompanied these European migrants as slaves.

Slave population in Trinidad and Tobago

As already mentioned, part of the slave population from Africa that arrived in Trinidad and Tobago did so through French and English slave traders who settled permanently on the island. Between 1590 and 1620, there were attempts to grow tobacco in Trinidad and on the coast of Guyana, but these attempts failed because the so-called Caribs destroyed the plantations. In 1621, the Dutch arrived in Tobago, where together with neighboring islands, they began to develop commercial networks in which, beyond the fact that the tobacco market had finally borne fruit in the Lesser Antilles, there was a dynamic of assault on Portuguese and Spanish routes. As the tobacco trade grew, the Dutch also began to introduce African slaves into this territory in 1640.

By the second half of the 17th century, the African slave labor force was both the basis of all agricultural production and the largest social group in the English and French Antilles. "In 1700, the population of African descent constituted approximately 75% of the population in the English and French Lesser Antilles". The work they did was mainly on tobacco and sugarcane plantations. By the end of the 17th century, "sugarcane occupied about half of the cultivated land in the Lesser Antilles, the other half being occupied by tobacco, cotton, food crops, and crops of lesser importance".

For African captives, the American continent represented "a destination of hardship and suffering". The French who settled in Trinidad from 1776 to 1783 with their slaves started a plantation society, which obviously needed labor to flourish successfully. This supported slavery as a necessity: "Slaves became, from the outset, the resource that would lead to wealth in Trinidad, and thus slavery was institutionalized on the island, and slaves became the basis of the economy".

By the 19th century, Trinidad was already an English colony, and the plantations became primarily composed of sugarcane. Owing to the high demand for this product, the native slave labor force was no longer sufficient; thus, "Great Britain began to transport slaves from Africa and from other colonies (Barbados, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Grenada) to maximize the island's agricultural potential". This confirms that Great Britain had begun a transatlantic trade in African captives to supply forced labor to both Trinidad and the rest of its colonies in the Lesser Antilles.

Slave records show that at the beginning of the 19th century in Trinidad, men outnumbered women by 70%. This finding is important because once the slave trade was abolished, the slavery enterprise depended entirely on reproduction among the captives. However, this reproduction was complicated by the physical and nutritional abuse to which both male and female slaves were subjected. "Studies have shown that slaves in Trinidad were short because of poor nutrition and overwork and that one-third of slaves died in the process of clearing the land".. Famine, working from sunrise to sunset, and poor medical care gradually reduced the slave birth rate: "According to records analyzing mortality and birth rates on different types of plantations, fewer children were born on sugar plantations because there was a high level of miscarriages caused by the hard work to which women were subjected on these plantations".

Yoruba religion

Many scholars of the cultural, religious, and general history of Latin America and the Caribbean agree that slave ships from Africa brought millions of captives who had been captured for forced labor on foreign islands and lands. Inherently, they also brought with them a whole worldview, customs, and ways of life that were completely different from those of the European colonizers and the natives of the American continent. With respect to the constitution of new multiethnic societies, there were various dynamics of coexistence, one of the most important being religion.

Although millions of slaves came from Africa, it is a mistake to believe that they all shared the same social, cultural, political, or religious characteristics. The African continent is rather a mosaic of multiple and independent cultural manifestations, in which there may well be similarities between them, but nothing more than that. As far as religion is concerned, "The different religious manifestations of African origin have similarities between them, on the basis of the objectives pursued by their followers in their places of origin, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa".

Yoruba is an ethnic group in Nigeria that extends around the western area of Badagry, a town where there was a constant export of slaves to Cuba and other Caribbean islands, as far as Warri and inland, almost to Niger. It occupies an area of approximately 81,300 km². "The history of the Yoruba begins and revolves around Oduduwa, a legendary figure, both myth and reality, and Ilé-Ifé, considered by many to be a sacred city and the cradle of humanity". Oduduwa is conceived as the founding leader and Ilé-Ifé as the original source.

The life of Yoruba is marked by traditions and religious beliefs, which are at the center of its being and nonbeing. On this basis, their religion is conceived as a law that governs their thinking and acting. The Yoruba maintain their religions more for personal benefit here on earth than for any idea of a better life in heaven. They believe that it is the deity who controls the universe in all circumstances of life; they also believe in the transmigration of souls, in which deceased parents are reborn into the family of their children. For the Yoruba, all things have a soul, whether animate or inanimate; they condemn theft and falsehood. Because of their religious attitude, "it is suggested that they see the world as the appropriate place for life despite its inconveniences".

With regard to their temples and altars, various elements, such as rocks, trees, plants, lakes, rivers, streams, and even celestial phenomena, became repositories of the presence of divinities. Altars were placed in all places that, according to tradition, were connected with the presence of divinities. For this reason, many of these altars were found in forests considered sacred, as outdoor gathering places were also prioritized over temples. In addition, there were communal altars, which were of utmost importance because of the need to have something tangible and visible where representations of debts were placed, along with gifts and sacrifices offered to them.

Yoruba presence in Trinidad and Tobago

Various African religious traditions converged in Trinidad and Tobago separately prior to 1889. Owing to the slave trade, these two islands were a triangle of religiosity: on the one hand, the already very scarce traditions of the Caribs, the evangelization by the first Spanish colonizers, and the arrival of a wide range of African religious practices. Colonization meant hierarchy in all aspects; thus, African religions were strictly forbidden, and any slave caught practicing any of these traditions was punished.

One of the African religions that was practiced quite regularly, both in Tobago and Trinidad, was Yoruba, the cult of the Orishas. The flourishing of this religious tradition has been documented only since the 19th century. This is why much of what is written here about the Yoruba tradition of the 18th century in particular is mere inference and personal deduction based on extensive explanations in my bibliography.

It is difficult to trace the origins of oral religious practices worldwide, but when we discuss the religions practiced by the first slaves in the Lesser Antilles, the research becomes even more complicated. This is due mainly to the oral nature of the practice; cults transform, secrets are not shared, practices evolve, and there are no documents to guide us through the maze of questions and assumptions. Although African captives arrived in Trinidad and Tobago directly from Africa, there were also those who had already spent time on neighboring islands (such as Barbados, Jamaica, and Montserrat). This finding indicates that a percentage of them had most likely already undergone religious changes in the Caribbean, either through colonial coercion or through mere contact between civilizations.

It is very likely that in the early manifestations of the practice of worshiping the Orishas in Tobago, people gathered in celebrations with dancing, rituals, and food, which possibly included the yam plant. In Trinidad, the Yoruba-based Orisha tradition was among the most predominant. The Yoruba tradition probably arrived in Trinidad with the first African slaves, but it also continued and grew richer during the 1800s, when slavery was at its peak.

"A vital Yoruba Orisha tradition emerged in Trinidad that was able to withstand the pressures of colonial society while accommodating to various aspects of the new environment". The Yoruba people in Trinidad preserved their conception that the universe is governed by multiple spiritual forces: "At the head of this spiritual world was a Creator God, Olodumare or Olorun; he was followed by orishas, governing different aspects of existence, such as Esu the gatekeeper; Sango (Shango), orisha of thunder and lightning; Oshun (Ochún), orisha of love; ancestral spirits, capable of considerable influence over their descendants; and other spiritual forces, most notably, ase, the fundamental life force".

Despite several attempts to repress, censor, and impose Christianity on the Yoruba tradition, over the years, it managed to preserve characteristic and valuable features such as methods of divination through magic, "including methods of divination such as the use of obi seeds (kola nuts)". Additionally, as in various cases of different religious experiences throughout Latin America, the survival of this tradition is due to a couple of syncretisms that we will analyze later.

Shango, Orisha of Thunder

Shango is the god of lightning, and thunder, also known as Jakuta, is the stone thrower. He is said to be a god greatly feared by the Yoruba, who hates injustice, theft, falsehood, and poisoning. These values coincide with general Yoruba practices, which highlights the importance of the cult of this deity. There is more than one legend about the origin of Shango, which shares some similarities, such as Shango's hanging from an Oyán tree. There are also a couple of legends in which, as a fearful king who wanted to continue punishing his people, he asked for magic powders to be made that would increase his powers (he already threw thunderbolts) or grant him those powers and thus become an Orisha.

As the god of thunder, Sango can kill as easily as it can heal. Sango is capricious, multifaceted, and unpredictable and is portrayed differently in different places. On this basis, we believe that Shango has different representations; he can be male or female, black or white, depending on the region in which he is worshipped. Shango is a multifaceted god who can also be capricious. He is revered because healing practices can be performed with his help. The practice of Sangó Healing is an offshoot of the same tradition, which involves divination, fasting, and the use of medicinal herbs. Those who practice Sangó Healing "enter into trance or possession, perform animal sacrifices, act as spirit mediums, offer direct consultations, perform exorcisms, perform hands-on healing, and provide information about the nature, treatment, and cause of illnesses. "

Sangó in Trinidad and Tobago

In Trinidad and Tobago, Shango is not only an Orisha but also the official name of the entire Yoruba-based religion. "As noted, in Trinidad, all Orisa devotion is labeled Sango. Trotman (2007) contends that the designation of all Orisa religions as Sango in Trinidad may have occurred because in Africa, the rulers of the Kingdom of Oyo used the Orisa Sango to consolidate imperial power. Trotman (2007) also contends that in Trinidad and Grenada, various subethnic Yoruba groups sought to "transcend intrareligious animosities by emphasizing the common symbol of Sango" (219). This may be one reason that the Orisa religion was designated "Sango" in Trinidad and Grenada but does not explain why the Orisa religion is not designated "Sango" elsewhere in the Caribbean and the Americas (Bascom 1972).

The development and establishment of the cult of Shango in Trinidad and Tobago took place until the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century. I would venture to say that this establishment of the practice was because between the late 1700s and 1800s, the seed of religion and the Yoruba worldview was planted. "In Trinidad and other parts of the British West Indies, 'the development of Orisha traditions... was essentially a postslavery phenomenon, part of a larger pattern of movement linking the British West Indies...' [...] Consequently, the development of Orisha worship in Trinidad was augmented, if not jump-started, by the second wave of Yorùbá migrants". Although it is highly unlikely that the Orisha tradition has a long history in Trinidad and Tobago, it can be inferred that there were early manifestations of a cult that aroused the fear of Spanish, English, and French settlers because of its apparent mystical nature and connection with inanimate objects and natural phenomena. These aspects lead me to believe that there was also a possible closeness to native religions such as the Arawak, with whom they may have had a harmony of worship. Thinking about this hypothetical connection, I can also infer that it was because the Cult of Shango survived, grew stronger, and eventually became the most influential on the entire island.

Shango's devotees were not only those attracted to rituals but also oppressed Africans. The Orisha of thunder provided protection and inspiration to both slaves and those who had already achieved emancipation. For many African slaves, Shango punished masters and slave owners through violent thunderstorms that destroyed cotton, cane, and coffee crops. In addition, the Cult of Shango in Trinidad was based on the use of medicinal herbs, which may indicate that this Orisha served both as a spiritual refuge and as an inspiration to seek physical well-being.

Syncretism of Shango with Christian saints

Just as the full worship of Orishas developed in the 19th century, so did their syncretism with Christian saints. As in New Spain, there were also various ways of preserving African deities in the Caribbean. Below is a brief overview of the two most important syncretisms that Shango underwent in Trinidad and Tobago.

As a way to appease the cult and exterminate the traditions brought from Africa to the Caribbean, the colonists imposed Christian saints to supplant some Orishas. "In the Trinidadian cult, Shango is invariably equated with St. John, Oya with St. Catherine or St. Philomena, and Oshun with St. Anne or St. Philomena". Many of these saints retained the powers attributed to the Orishas. In addition, while this is one of the strongest arguments that has had over the years, and one that I also share, there are authors who have a different and very interesting position:

"I am more inclined to believe that syncretism likely began out of necessity. It developed into a full-fledged acceptance of Catholic saints into the Orisha tradition based on the compatibility of the systems and the opportunity for corevelation. This position is supported by the fact that the large numbers of Kongolese Christians already inhabiting Trinidad introduced Catholic saints to Yorùbá".

Here is another quote from an author who shares the most common view on syncretism with saints: "The Shango Cult in its present form is syncretistic, rooted in the religion of the Yoruba of Nigeria, but with many Catholic symbols and rituals, like other African American religions, such as Candomblé and Santería, Catholic saints substitute for African deities on the altars, while the real emblems of the divinities are hidden in a room accessible only to the faithful".

Another of the most important syncretisms has nothing to do with saints but with practices within the cult of Shango. Water is an element that is offered to the Orishas both in the Yoruba tradition and in the cult of Shango in Trinidad, but "in addition, in Trinidad, an interesting syncretism is seen in the belief that every Shango initiate should be baptized if he has not been baptized previously". The belief in baptism has been one of the most important achievements of colonial evangelization that permeates our lives to this day.

CONCLUSIONS

In conducting this research, my main hypothesis was that slaves arriving from Africa brought their worldviews with them and that these were both suppressed and enriched within the Caribbean territory by the confluence of other religious practices. However, this hypothesis has undergone significant reflection, as the research has shown that, in addition to having been in contact with other religions already within the islands, there was incredible contact in waiting ports full of captives and inside the slave ships. It has already been mentioned that Africa is not nearly a homogeneous territory in terms of religion or any other cultural practices. Therefore, within these spaces of captivity prior to the arrival in the Caribbean, there was religious coexistence in which the Yoruba tradition had the largest population.

"Given such a background, many of the non-Yoruba victims of the Yoruba wars who were sold into the New World would have spent a considerable period marching through the Yoruba area to the coast and would have interacted with Yoruba captives who would have been in the majority and, therefore, in a position to influence the African world view which they subsequently brought to the New World". The Yoruba worldview was adopted by a percentage of the African population held captive during their journeys to the Caribbean. Thus, the idea was constructed that large segments of the population shared the same worldview and that, there were no fundamental distinctions in religious practices from Africa.

Precolonial and colonial studies of the Caribbean have been limited in comparison to those conducted in New Spain, the Andean region, and Brazil. This may be due not only to a language barrier, with much of the archival material in languages such as French or Danish but also to the fact that we often forget that the Caribbean came first. The gateway to the American continent was through the Caribbean, and these islands, although small in size and seemingly lacking commercial importance or a flow of cultures that enriched each other, continue to be a fundamental part of Latin American history.

The field of religion in the Caribbean is not only fascinating and worthy of study; it is also a long-standing mystery that seems very difficult to understand and, above all, to find the beginning, the origin. As mentioned above, because it is an oral tradition, it is very difficult to know what truly happened and how to ascertain its veracity and even to verify that the connections between the three cultures are indeed found in the Shango cult of Trinidad. Clearly, there are countless loose ends that, perhaps in the future, can be woven together in a way that will give us new perspectives, a more complete view of the religious practices nurtured between civilizations.

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