



Identity

I Left Christianity for an Ancient African Faith

The Yoruba religion helped me overcome immense grief and connected me with my ancestors.

By [Nakia Brown](#); illustrated by [Theresa Chromati](#)

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DEVOTIONAL DANCING. ART BY THERESA CHROMATI

When my father died, I stopped believing in God. I was 15 years old, and it was 2009. He passed away from a heart attack on the front porch of our home. My family tried to comfort me with sayings like "the Lord has called him home," but these words offered me no solace. I couldn't understand God's plan as I grappled with how empty I felt. I missed him so much. I'd call his cellphone just to hear him on voicemail.

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Before my dad transitioned, I was a part of the vast majority of African Americans in this country who belong to the Christian religion. My dad grew up in Hampton, Virginia, and was a Christian man. Our house was built around the church—Bible quotes were plastered on the walls and my dad would play gospel music by artists like [Marvin Sapp](#) on Sunday mornings. Unfortunately, his death left me with so many questions that I felt

Christianity wasn't able to answer. How could I believe in the Father after losing mine?

For more than five years, praying was hard for me. I wondered why I should talk to a God who had caused me so much pain. But after years of grieving, I found my way back to God through an ancient African religion. The Yoruba faith has given me the answers I could not find on my own, brought me closer to powers greater than myself, and helped me overcome the pain of losing the first man I ever loved.

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One of the reasons Christianity ceased to feel like something I could claim for my own, especially when I was in the depths of grief over my father, was its history of racial oppression coupled with my personal experiences with racism. It became increasingly difficult for me, a young black woman, to seek salvation in a religion that had largely perpetuated the lie of a pale and

blue-eyed Jesus. Later, I learned about Christianity's early history in the Middle East and Northern Africa and connected with many of Christ's universal lessons. However, when I was mourning, the religion just didn't feel like it could lift me out of my grief.

But I instinctively knew that if I wanted to mend from my father's death, I would need to connect with something. At first, I simply started exploring my history as a black person. I found a foundation for this exploration at Everyone's Place, a black-owned Baltimore bookstore that has been in the community for 31 years. The two-story shop often smells of frankincense and myrrh and maintains a steady flow of patrons purchasing everything from imported cowrie necklaces to books by Queen Afua.

My father was always adamant about education, so by taking a proactive approach to study[ing] the history of black people, I felt like I was doing the work he would have wanted me to do. Everyone's Place is where I began to immerse myself in the ideas of thinkers like El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, Dr. Frances Cress Welsing, and Assata Shakur. I read these authors to remember myself. Their ideas and thoughts were a part of a unique healing process—one that tore down my self-hatred, built up a sense of black collectivism, and gave me more concrete ideas on how to navigate the world as a strong black woman without the protection and supervision of my father. I missed my dad deeply and still woke up early on Sunday mornings hoping to hear

the sound of his gospel music. But as these rituals faded, new rituals would soon come to fill their space.

Our Lady of the Holy Death Is the World's Fastest Growing Religious Movement

"People feel more comfortable asking her for favors that they probably shouldn't ask a Catholic saint for. If you want your shipment of meth to arrive safely, it's easier to ask Santa Muerte than the Virgin of Guadalupe."

 **Vice** / Rick Paulas / Nov 13, 2014

By the time I came across the University of Baltimore's Cuba Study Abroad program, I was truly ready to heed the call of my ancestors and connect with something greater than myself. I quickly learned that the Yoruba religion is a spiritual system that had covertly survived the violence, rape, and subjugation of the Mid-Atlantic slave trade. The Yoruba people were one of the largest ethnic groups brought against their will to the Western world. They hailed from West Africa in what would be considered the Benin Republic, Togo, and southwestern Nigeria today. Although these people saw

the devil in the form of the slave trade, they brought their God across the sea with them—the Ifa religion, which is generally referred to as the "Yoruba religion" today.

Despite efforts by white Christians to eradicate the Yoruba faith, the spiritual system survived across the African diaspora through its syncretization with other religions. Today, the Yoruba has many names and variations. In Brazil, it is called *Candomble*. In Trinidad and Tobago, they call it *Obeah*. In Haiti, it is known as *Vodun*. In the American South, it is *Voodoo*. And in Cuba and Mexico and Afro Latino communities in North America, it is referred to as *Santeria* or *Regla De Ocha*. What often links these diverse practices across the African diaspora is their origin in the traditional Yoruba faith, their reverence for ancestors, and their rites of passage. An initiate is trained by elders for many years before they can become a "Babalawo," which means father of mysteries, or a "Iyalawo," which means mother of mysteries. Often, many initiates will travel back to the religion's homeland, Nigeria, for a portion of their initiation. All permutations also continue to recognize orishas, deities who are the eldest children of the religion's almighty being, Olodumare.

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The fact that the Yoruba religion is still practiced today represents its powerful ability to survive in the face of generational trauma and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. There are many young people today exploring and spreading the faith: French Cuban electronic soul duo Ibeyi sing in the Yoruba language and use orisha allegories in their songs, Princess Nokia raps regularly about her orisha altars, and the DC-based group OSHUN are named after the orisha that governs the sweet waters and depict Yoruba deities in their music videos. These notable instances underscore a wider adoption happening among young people of color today. For me, once I was exposed to it, it just made sense. The Yoruba religion felt like me—faced with challenges and loss, but steadfast with the power to carry on.



YEMOJA, GODDESS OF THE OCEANS. ART BY THERESA CHROMATI

As a part of the study abroad program, which was organized by Diaspora Travel & Trade, I traveled to Cuba in 2016 for two weeks to study the Yoruba religion. Cuba was colonized by Spain in the 1490s and the first Yoruba people arrived there in the 1500s. Originally, each orisha had their own group of expert practitioners. However, due to the slave trade, the

knowledge of all the orishas had to be shared between practitioners and unified to sustain the practice. Not many orishas survived this. According to religion and society professor at the University of Matanzas, Andres Rodriguez Reyes, out of the hundreds of orishas, fewer than 100 orishas are widely known in Cuba today. Commonly, only about 11 or so orishas are widely recognized throughout the African diaspora.

While a great deal was lost in slavery, we found ways to cleverly preserve our past. Afro Cubans syncretized their orishas behind Catholic saints. Oshun, the owner of beauty, femininity, love, and sensuality was syncretized with the Lady of Charity. Changó, the owner of fire, lightning, war, drumming, and dancing, was syncretized with Santa Barbara. Today, however, the Yoruba religion is no longer a clandestine practice. It's woven into everyday life—from the streets to the bars—making Cuba a perfect place on this side of the world to dive deeper into the practice and see its cultural perseverance up close.

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I came face to face with the Yoruba religion on my very first day in La Habana, Cuba, when I visited a Cuban family's house in the Santos Suárez neighborhood. There, I met an older Cuban woman with long, wavy gray hair and mocha skin who was a practitioner of "espiritismo cruzado." Espiritismo is Spanish for spiritualism and cruzado refers to Santeria, the name of the Yoruba religion once it mixed with Catholicism in Cuba. This mediumship practice of communicating with spirits was passed down to her from her father, and she practiced espiritismo cruzado her entire life.

Although this woman died not long after we met, the time we spent together had an incredible impact on me: She opened up her home to me and took me to her altar room. Inside, there were large glass display cabinets filled with vases, dolls, beads, and more to represent each orisha. One of her altars was adorned with pictures of her father. She guided me to give a blessing. She washed my hands with holy rosewater and invited me to call on the name of my own ancestors. I said the name of my father, Vernice. Afterward, she said to me, "an ancestor is strong with you."

This is an important concept in the Yoruba religion because our deceased loved ones are not gone—they are our guides. In the Yoruba religion, it is

taught that one should acknowledge, honor, and consult ancestors. This approach to understanding life and death helped me come to terms with my pain. Death was no longer finite and life had depth and dimension. The two worlds were connected, and my father was closer to me than I realized.

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It was during that trip in Cuba that I decided to go beyond simply studying the Yoruba religion as an academic pursuit. After spending two weeks visiting homes of santeros and santeras, taking long walks with initiates along the Havana seawall, taking classes on Santeria at the University of Matanzas, and hearing stories called *patakis* about the orishas—I made the decision to make it an essential part of my life. I am not a priestess of the Yoruba religion, but I am a witness to its power. It helped me feel linked to my father and in tune with powers greater than myself after years of pain, grief, and isolation. The Yoruba religion is as captivating as a Djembe drum, as ancient as Ethiopian fossils and as sacred as our fathers.

Like my life and your life, this religion is a legacy of our beloved Africa. The scattering of the practice demonstrates the resilience of black people through pain. Its survival is a symbol of our salvation. For a long time, I felt like I lost God when I lost my father. Sometimes, I still struggle. Some days, I cry when I miss him. But when I feel like I have nothing left to give, I give

offerings to my ancestors and to the orishas and I believe that someone higher hears my heart.

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