

Shamanic Parallels in the Thunder Deity Shango: From Yoruba to Cuba and on to Miami

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Shango's role as shaman can be traced from its African origin in Yorubaland to Cuba which was populated by Yorubas during the slave trade from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, and to a second migration from Cuba to the United States, due to political persecution. This African religion, traveling as it did from Yorubaland, to Cuba, to America, came to be known in the New World as Santería,¹ the worship of Saints. Shango is one of the *orishas* or main deities worshipped in this polytheistic religion and he is seen as one of the main intermediaries between Olodumare, the remote Supreme Being and the faithful, known as the *Lucumis*.

In dealing with the great god of thunder, lightning and fire as a *shaman*, we must first arrive at an understanding of the term, for it is the intention of this author to discuss Shango within a shamanic context.

Mircea Eliade states in his work *Shamanism; Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* that shamanism implies the following characteristics: the use of magic as in "mastery over fire;" belief in Supreme Beings and spirits; mythological concepts; and techniques of ecstasy and healing particular to the shaman alone. These are accomplished through the shaman's unique ability to communicate with nature and thus act as intermediary between man and the Supreme Being and spirits, while at the same time coexisting with other forms of magic and religion within his society.

Many myths surround the cult of Shango and some are based on known facts. Historically, Shango was either the third or fourth Alafin (Divine King) in the city of Oyo. He was an excellent warrior, a medicine man, yet a controversial ruler as well. Differing stories arose at the time of his death, but the essential tale states that King Shango was seen leaving the city on his horse, and when he failed to return, members from his court went to search for him and found him hanging from an ayan tree with his horse close by. Later, word spread that Shango did not hang himself, but instead rose to the heavens to live in a castle in the sky and to persecute those who would go against him by throwing lightning bolts and fire at them or at their homes. As a result of the growing legends surrounding him, his death, and his 'afterlife,' in the nineteenth century Shango was deified and he was given the name 'Jakuta' which was the Yoruba's ancient god of thunder (whose name means stone-thrower).

The deification of this shamanic Divine King can be seen as a shrewd political maneuver by the Royal House of Oyo to save it from the more realistic memory of Shango as a tyrannical ruler. Non-believers of Shango's deification suddenly had their homes struck by 'mysterious' lightning and fire from the sky. Politically-generated (or coincidental) accidents contributed to fear and respect for the former

Divine King, now turned god, and led to the start of a highly developed cult of Shango filled with complex rituals and rich symbolism.

Shango priests in Africa today enjoy a greater prestige than those in Cuba. For example, the possessions of a lightning victim still go to the Shango priest and a person whose house has been struck by lightning must seek advice from the priest as to the proper appeasement for Shango. Another characteristic of the African Shango priests is that they become transvestites, wearing female clothing and doing their hair in a female fashion, when on "the god's business."² This enables them to defy sexual distinction and the roles prescribed by it. It is a powerful assumption for a person to believe he can be both sexes and I see this as one of the Shango priest's more potent characteristics. Along with his role as a transvestite, the priest is able to articulate the troubling ambiguities of man in general as well as those particular to himself. This represents a sophisticated escape technique for a person whose role in life is bound by societal pressures which force him to behave in a certain codified manner.

Though there were many destinations for African slaves, it is in Cuba where we find the best preservation of this African religion, no doubt because Yorubas were being brought to Cuba until the year 1880.³ In Cuba the god Shango enjoys the same popularity or even higher respect than in Africa. The *Lucumis* worship Shango as god of thunder, fire, dance, music and drums; Shango also came to represent the masculinity of the Afro-Cuban male. His stories about being a triumphant warrior carried over to Cuba and grew to further transform Shango into an adventurer, god of freedom and a diviner. Eventually he became a more human god, being able to punish and be punished, to lie and be lied to. Additionally, a pantheon of gods was brought over to Cuba along with many myths and tales. Adaptations had to be made as needed and flexibility became one of the main traits of the newly-founded religion, Santería.

One of the more evident changes in symbolic representations is that of the sacred tree. In Africa, the ayan tree was sacred to Shango and in Cuba it became the royal palm tree (Figure 1), because the ayan tree is not found in Cuba, and because the natural configuration of the royal palm, with its tall, slender tree-trunk and a protruding spear from the center, makes it a natural target for lightning. Shango is said to sit atop this tree and hurl thunderstones down on his enemies or on anyone who angers or upsets him.⁴ His followers believe they can obtain direct knowledge from the strength residing within this tree by placing their foreheads on the trunk; rituals in connection with rainfall are also performed around this sacred palm. The tree can thus be seen as a strong symbol for the faithful as well as a natural

conductor of supernatural powers, and is therefore one of the ways in which Shango serves as intermediary for man through nature.

The *Lucumis* adopted the saints found in the Catholic church to represent their Yoruba *orishas*.⁵ For Shango it was St. Barbara (Figure 2), patron saint of artillery and storms. Red is sacred to St. Barbara and it was Shango's color in Africa, thus it served as a natural choice for the color-conscious Yoruba. Further similarities can be seen in the attributes of artillery and storms when compared with thunder and lightning, both having explosive and loud properties. The Catholic church portrays St. Barbara with a crenellated crown, sword in one hand and a fiery castle behind her. African myths say Shango lives in a splendid castle in the sky, and—because he was a good warrior—swords and other warlike weapons are naturally associated with him.

The matter of dual sexuality is another natural transition for Shango. As explained earlier, Shango priests in Africa become transvestite when on "the god's business," even calling themselves "wife of the god."⁶ Thus, the fact that their male god is now represented by a female saint merely reaffirms their prior religious beliefs. I do not see this duality as a source of confusion; on the contrary, it further enhances Shango's powers as a deity by allowing him the freedom of both sexes. This aspect of a dual sexuality is present in the majority of the shamanic cults world-wide. Often some form of homosexuality and sexual transformation is part of a shaman's role.

Shango is represented in Santeria mainly through representations of St. Barbara—lithographs, molded ceramic statues and holy cards of the Saint holding a sword in one hand, wearing a crenellated crown and dressed in red (Figures 2 and 3). These representations were originally intended for the use of Roman Catholics, of course, and were simply adopted by the *Lucumis*.

Small wooden statues depicting Shango, hand-carved images, can also be found. These figures consist of a person standing or sitting, a sword in one hand and an axe in the other with a double-headed axe on top of the head, and sometimes holding a cigar. This type of crude representation is for placement on an altar and thus is not to be taken for its aesthetic content but instead for the power residing within it. This power is transmitted from the deity to whom it is dedicated to the owner of the sacred object.

Equestrian representations of Shango are also found in Africa, Cuba, and Miami. In Africa, the horse played an important role in Yoruba military history.⁷ A natural association can be seen with its use in representations of Shango because he was a Divine King before his death. A further connection is established with shamanism where a horse is known to transport souls.

In Cuba the equestrian motif evolved to the form of an American Indian sometimes on horseback. The actual reason for this is not known but conjectures can be derived from obvious symbolism. An American Indian brave on horseback is representative of an excellent warrior, which Shango was. He represents masculinity, courage and strength. These are qualities that Shango came to represent to the Afro-cubans and thus the popular equestrian image of Shango was developed to a great extent in Cuba and even more so in Miami.

Of the items that are sacred to Shango none is more obvious, both in Africa and in Cuba, than the double-

headed axe. The motif is found most prominently in the dance wands (Figure 4). Thunderstones, or flint celts symbolizing fire, are represented by the double-headed axe; Shango is believed to hurl these down from the heavens to those who offend him. The dance wands represent a devotee of Shango in Africa, and there it is usually a female fertility figure with a child at her breast, a figure of calm and repose who bears the great force of Shango's fire and lightning on her head. In Cuba, the figure on the dance wand is *not* usually a fertility figure but is a devotee. Dance wands are made from wood of the royal palm tree in Cuba, and of the ayan tree in Africa, the trees sacred to Shango. These instruments are used by persons who are initiated into the Shango cult and who are in a state of trance or possession. During the rituals associated with these wands, the dancer will perform a type of mime, recalling stories of Shango's past life.

The symbolic representation of fire in these dance wands comes from Africa where actual rites of purification by fire were performed by Shango initiates. They include either carrying a vessel containing fire on top of the head, swallowing fire, or plunging a hand into fire.⁸ These rituals recur symbolically in Santeria through the use of the dance wands.

In the dance wand we have an example of many shamanic symbols combined in one sacred item. The dance wand transforms the holder into a strong person able to handle the great fiery force of Shango; it is used only by a possessed person and incorporates the natural elements of fire and wood, two important conductors and transformers in the Shamanic world. Furthermore, the god Shango's point of entry into his devotee is through the initiate's head, the most susceptible point of entry for spirits, as well as the locus of spiritual possession.

The necklace is another sacred item of Shango, as well as other *orishas*. What makes a necklace sacred to Shango is the color of the beads: for Shango it would be red and white, both in Africa and in Cuba. In Santeria the myth evolved that originally Shango's color was red but his mother, Obatala, whose color was white, felt Shango became too hot for his own head sometimes and she then decided to cool him off by adding her white. The color red is symbolic of blood, life, vitality, strength, and heat, all traits associated with Shango. Shango's priests sometimes feel they must throw cool water on divining instruments such as shells or coconuts when seeking Shango's help since the priests insist that the instruments become too hot to handle. A person seeking advice from Shango is told to keep his head cool by splashing cold water on it frequently. All of these practices imply that Shango takes quick possession of a person's mind and his fiery nature quickly overcomes the individual and can cause him to act in an irrational nature, which Shango is sometimes portrayed as doing.

There is once again a definite shamanic connection in the emphasis on the head and the need to protect it by keeping it cool through the use of water, or by symbolically wearing a red and white beaded necklace.

Very powerful objects which are kept in bowls on altars away from view of non-initiates, stones are another natural element sacred to Shango in both Africa and Cuba. Only the priests of Shango are allowed to keep stones on their altars which are usually located in separate rooms in their homes.

Upturned mortars are the basic items of altars in both Yoruba and Cuba (Figure 5). They are sacred to Shango because of their drumlike qualities and because of the sounds which can be produced from striking them. There is also a metaphorical link between the sound of thunder and a pestle pounding against a mortar.⁹ Their use, however, is as a seat for initiates while their heads are shaved during the initiation rituals. The exteriors are painted in red and white to dedicate the mortars to Shango, and they may be purchased at local *Botanicas*.¹⁰

Bata drums are another very important item sacred to Shango. Drums are used at times of ritual dances called *Bembes*, and during initiation ceremonies which place the initiate in a trance. These drums must be carved by a person knowledgeable in Shango rituals since sacrifices must be made to the tree from which they will be carved. Bata drums come in sets of three and range from high, medium, to low pitch. The drums are each given names and must be fed by their owners. These drums, as with all drums of the shamanic world, are used to summon the deity and also to greet the priests attending the rituals.

The number sacred to Shango is four and December 4th is the day dedicated to both Shango and his Catholic counterpart, St. Barbara. Public dancing and festivities are held each year on that day, including a parade in Miami in which devotees dress up in red and white clothing, with one or two parading on horseback costumed as Indian braves.

Initiation into the cult of Shango is undergone by two types of—mostly male—candidates: those born with a sign from Shango, or those who receive a sign from Shango in the form of a trance or a possession during a festival or ritual at the time Shango is summoned. An individual may also get a sign when he is asking a diviner for advice.

In any case, an initiation is seen as a pact between man and a divine protective spirit. Man agrees to serve and sacrifice for his *orisha* and his *orisha* agrees to help him throughout his life.

Initiation into the different *orisha* cults basically follows the same procedures with specific modification to include the individual *orisha's* sacred items. Dr. Mercedes Sandoval's book *La Religion Afrocubana* gives an excellent account of this rarely described procedure. The entire initiation process is a lengthy one with complex steps, lasting for a period of approximately one year. It is also a very expensive process for which a priest might charge anywhere from \$3,000 to \$6,000 for a full initiation into an *orisha* cult.

The following highlights the more significant steps of the initiation ritual: after an extensive learning process, the initiate begins to wear a sacred necklace with the colors pertaining to his *orisha* (for Shango it would be red and white). The beads are threaded with a cotton fiber so it can absorb the different potions, blood and waters used

throughout the initiation process. After this the initiate receives special instructions on the care of his necklace and of his *orisha*. The oracles are then consulted and if they approve, the initiate is allowed to wear his new sacred necklace. Drum playing occurs at this time and the initiate falls into a trance. Next a marriage of sorts occurs in which initiate and *orisha* exchange vows and make a commitment with everlasting bonds. On the evening prior to initiation, the initiate takes a symbolic swim to wash away past errors and cleanse his soul. He now begins to dress entirely in white. Initiation then takes place at the home of a priest. Twenty-one herbs are boiled in water with the sacred stones. During the next seven days, the initiate drinks from and bathes in this water which has received blood from animal sacrifices (for Shango the sacred animal is the goat). Next, the initiate's head is shaved and painted in yellow, green and red in a bull's eye pattern. This shaving and painting of the head indicates spirit entry and possession through the head and the initiate falls into a trance. A new name is given him and the sacred stones are placed behind his head for transmittal of power from *orisha* to initiate; a cross is then traced on his tongue. After the trance or travel state has ended, animal sacrifice occurs with the initiate's help and he later drinks the blood from the head. The drums play for the initiate to dance and he is now authorized to dance with the sacred dance wand at other *Bembes* and festivals.

In summarizing Shango as shaman, we see that he falls under the category of departmental shamanism since he is mainly responsible for lightning and thunder. Once a warrior, he has come to be represented as an Indian on horseback, symbol of bravery and masculinity.

Altered states are achieved by his priests during time of ritual *Bembes* and initiation. At that time the possessed speak for him and act out his expected form of behavior. Performances occur once a year on December 4, as well as at private initiations and *Bembes*.

Transformations are achieved through the use of the colors red and white on clothes, beads and sacred objects. Shaven heads with special paints to symbolize the *orisha's* knowledge and force allow the *orisha* to enter and possess an individual. Drum-beats are a main transformational device since they are particularly useful in placing a person in a state of trance. Also, the drum-beats summon Shango to come down from his fiery castle in the sky and to partake in the festivities or to impart special knowledge and advice to his mortal friends.

Within his societies, Shango is greatly admired, respected and accepted. All of his priests undergo special selection and a specialized training particular to Shango. He acts as an intermediary for man and the remote Supreme Being, Olodumare, through the use of nature and natural forces.

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1 The Syncretic religion of Santeria is a combined use of Yoruba religion with that aspect of Catholicism involving the worship of an extensive pantheon of saints.

2 William Butler Fagg, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 156.

3 Angelina Pollak Eltz, *Cultos Afroamericanos*, (Caracas: Universidad Catolica Andres Bello, 1977), p. 224.

4 Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte*, (Miami: Ultra Graphics Corp., 1983), p. 221.

5 Mercedes Cros Sandoval, *La Religion Afrocubana*, (Madrid: Playor S.A., 1975), p. 189.

6 Fagg, p. 156.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

8 Robert Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 3.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

10 *Botanicas* are local stores in the New World which sell all of the ritualistic items for Santeria. One can obtain anything from a Catholic holy card to live animals for sacrifice.

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Fig. 1, Royal palm tree native to Cuba and Miami.



Fig. 2, A figurine of the Catholic St. Barbara cast from a mold.



Fig. 3, Lithograph of St. Barbara.



Fig. 4, African dance wand depicting the double-headed axe motif.



Fig. 5, Upturned mortar with bowl used to keep sacred stones.