

## Yoruba Influences in Florida

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My current research traces the impact of African thought and African example on populations in Florida. My original research in Nigeria into the arts of the Yoruba-speaking peoples focused on arts used in leadership context and in religion. Those studies are the basis for my explorations into the arts and visual environments created in the United States (and especially Florida) by those who have converted to Yoruba *orisha* veneration.

Part of my research addresses the visual environments created by Yoruba Americans living in Alachua County, particularly Baba Onabamiero Ogunleye of Archer. Ogunleye lived in Oyotunji in South Carolina for nine years, where he was initiated into the Yoruba religion. Later, after settling in Archer, he traveled to Oshogbo, Nigeria, to be initiated as a *babalawo*. His mentor in Nigeria travels to Archer to preside over initiations. I have investigated not only Ogunleye's sculpture but also the visual environment the creates in shrines and altars. Of particular interest to me is the development over time of the altar to the *orisha* Ogun, who was exceptionally important in

the region of Nigeria where I did earlier research. I have examined other shrines to Ogun both in North Florida and in South Florida for comparative purposes.

Further research explores the Orisha Gardens in Central Florida maintained by the Ifa Foundation of North and Latin America. Philip Neimark is of Jewish heritage, but he converted to Yoruba religion by way of Cuban Santeria in Miami. He practiced as a *babalawo* in Chicago for many years and then practiced in Indiana before relocating to Florida. His wife Vassa is of Greek descent, and she too converted to *orisha* veneration. The two formed the foundation in order to reach out to people around the world who are seeking spiritual guidance through the Yoruba religion. The Ola Olu retreat in a rural area not far from the Ocala National Forest, is filled with sculptural forms from Nigeria and elsewhere as well as objects created by Iyanifa Vassa. Initiates from around the world come to Ola Olu to be initiated.

I have signed a contract with the University Press of Florida for a book tentatively titled *Africa in Florida* that will address 500 years of African presence in Florida, beginning with Juan Garrido, a conquistador of African descent who accompanied Ponce de Leon on his initial voyage in 1513. The book, co-edited with Amanda Carlson of the University of Hartford, will include essays by a range of scholars from the United States, England and Mexico. One of my chapters on the art of Ogunleye is co-authored by Ade Ofunniyin, a recent UF PhD in Anthropology. Another chapter addresses the

visual environment of Ola Olu. The publication of the book will be in time for the 500th anniversary of the arrival of explorers of African descent in 1513. I am also working on a comparative study of Ogun Altars in Florida which may be published in a journal that plans a special issue on "Ritual Arts of the Black Atlantic."



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