

# TELL

Nigeria's Independent Weekly

## Panorama



Toll-free gate to Oyotunji where man has created an "ancient village" in a modern setting

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## Old Culture in a New World

It was a spectacular show of pomp and pageantry as adherents of *Obatala*, king and father figure of all deities in Yoruba cosmology, converged on Oyotunji Village, South Carolina, United States, to celebrate the 2011 Obatala Day

By ADEKUNLE YUSUF/South Carolina

No posters. No jingles. No billboard ads. And definitely no variant of paid commercial publicity of any sort. But this posed no distraction, as many seemed to have saved the date. And so, on August 27 and 28, scores of happy people, robed in snow-white attires often associated with their god, gathered to celebrate 2011 *Obatala* Day in Oyotunji, a rural community that prides itself as practising and promoting traditional Yoruba culture near Sheldon, Beaufort County, South Carolina, United States, US.

Though early hours on the first day scripted out on a low-key

note, events soon spiralled into greater vivacity as the day matured, despite the roaring fever of Hurricane Irene, which was already devouring some states along eastern coasts in the US while the celebration was in progress. A day to the festival, some parts of the village, especially the temple axis, had enjoyed a facelift – thanks to one Oludoye, chief spokesperson for the kingdom, who worked tirelessly to give the village a facelift “because I cannot stand by and allow the celebration of my *Orisa* to take place in a dirty environment.” Also, in the lulls of the early morning, the weird settlement further played host to some propitiation rites, which priests explained as a necessary spiritual cleansing – all prepared Oyotunji for the business of the day.

And as early as 11am, the rural community had been awoken from its accustomed quietness by loud drumbeats and cultural singings, suddenly becoming a beehive of

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festivities as cars of various models and colours pulled up at various positions at the entrance to the village, signalling the commencement of the day's packed activities. From all directions, the spectacle was gripping, acted by a motley crowd, consisting of a straggle of cultural die-hards and a tiny army of fun-seekers. Some were locals, but many actually had travelled across long distances to grace the annual festivities. And the traditional events, lasting two full days, seemed to have handsomely rewarded everyone's cravings!

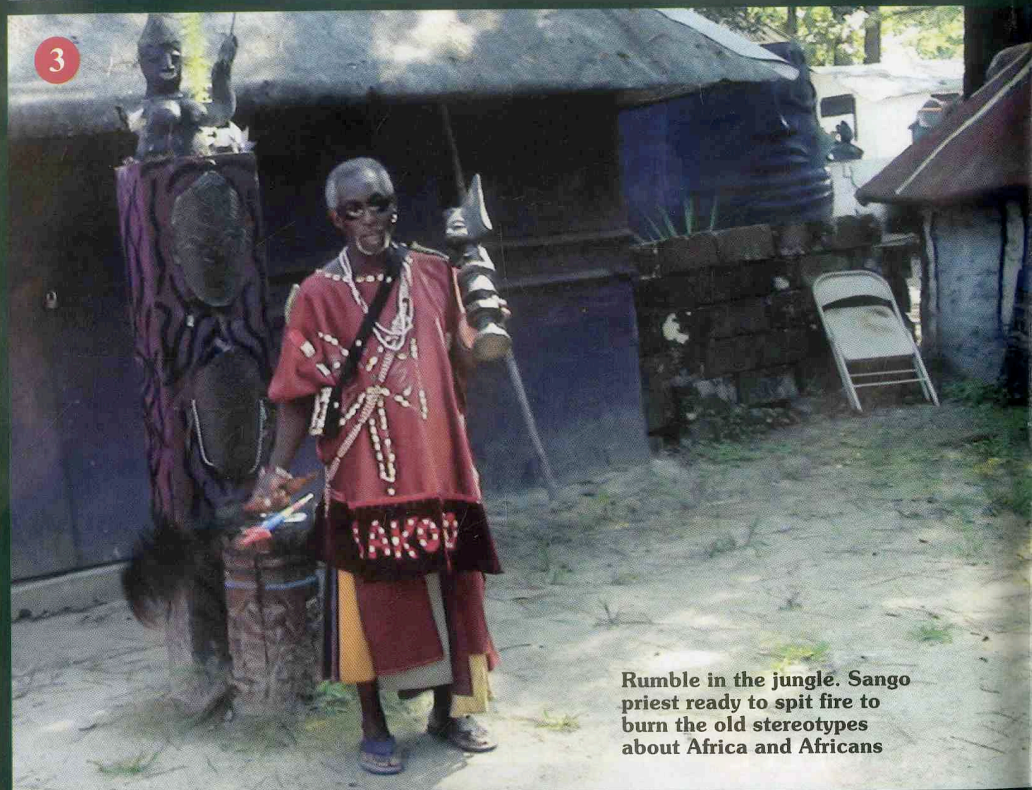
By the time the celebration began in full swing, all villagers, joined by some visiting priests and priestesses, filed out in rows, all donning resplendent dresses, singing, dancing and acting out in pantomime the behaviour of their deity – in deference to the blooming acoustic rhythms and percussions oozing out of various busy drums. This spiritual march, led by drumbeats from some able-bodied youths that guided the celebrants on a tour of various shrine spots that abound in the settlement, would send even the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, who are seen as the original owners of the culture and religion now resurrecting with astounding fervency in the bowels of Oyotunji, to voyages in bewilderment and outright disbelief.

As intensity of the festive mood progressed, one of many things that would strikingly pummel the mind of visitors was the dressing mode of these ecstatic worshippers. As the sun sizzled on the village, men and women – old and young – all appeared half-naked, exuding a spirited cosmic life and vitality in the baking sun. Leading the dancing march were two damsels – one of about five or six years old while the second lady who carried on her head a well-festooned calabash, obviously containing objects of worship, was of nubile age. In this age and civilisation, the imagination of the uninitiated is bound to run riot, given the weirdness of what the eyes will feast on during the celebration: as worshippers of the *Orisa* of the white cloth jived and pantomimed rhythmically to the undulated rhythms and sundry esoteric chants, so also were the bare breasts of priestesses, which conspicuously danced pendulously throughout the joyous moments.

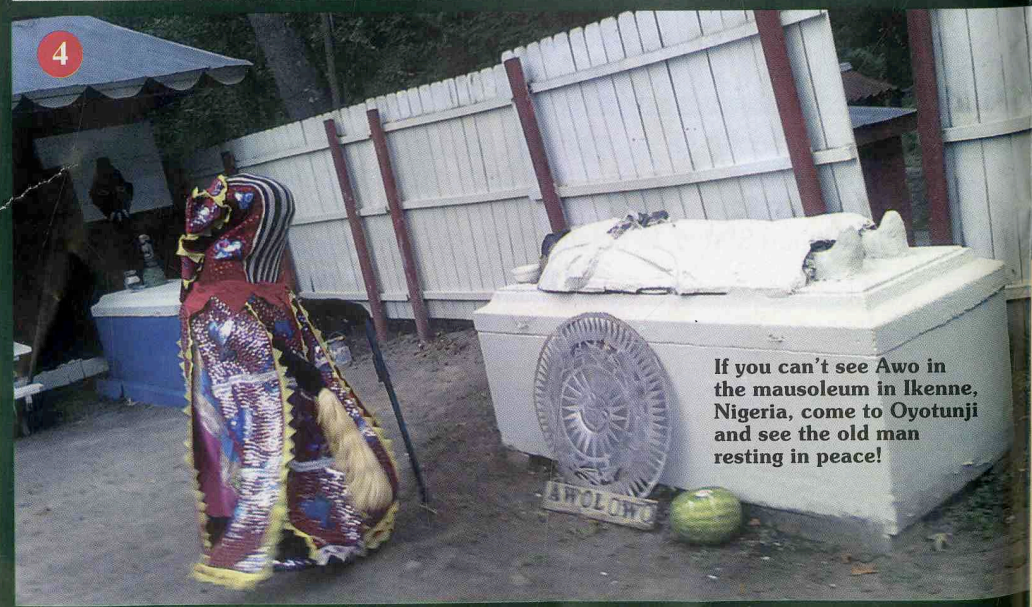
As the celebration train occasionally berthed at some shrine spots and groves, adherents of *Obatala* muttered prayers and supplications to the gods, accompanied by thunderous choruses of *ase* or *amen*. At some points, they prayed fervently for good fortune for their *Oba*, themselves and the kingdom that houses them. Much later in the day, their *Oba*,



2  
Down Freedom Road. From "Oyo'le" to "Oyo'ju" (no, Oyotunji) the heavenly spirit (*egungun*) commutes and communes with human beings



3  
Rumble in the jungle. Sango priest ready to spit fire to burn the old stereotypes about Africa and Africans



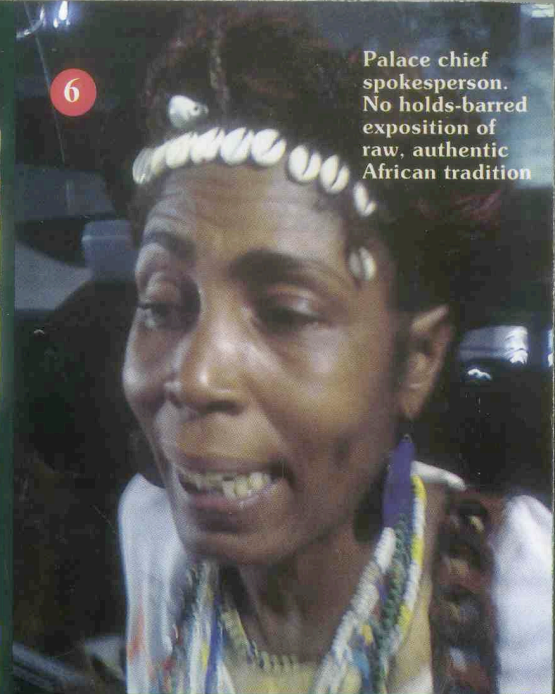
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If you can't see Awo in the mausoleum in Ikenne, Nigeria, come to Oyotunji and see the old man resting in peace!

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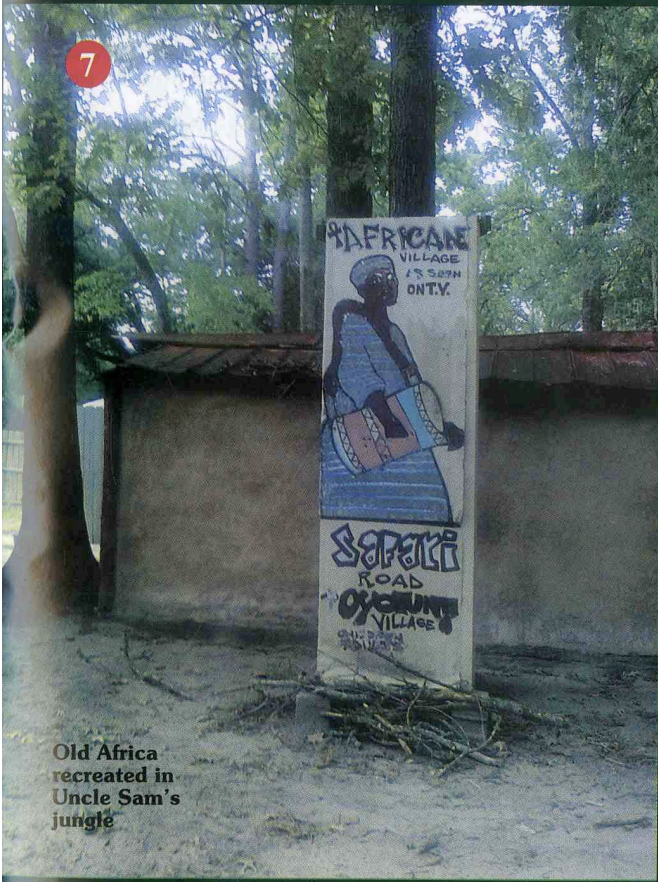
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Here comes the "Arugba of America". A virgin from head to toe like the original arugba of Osogbo



6

Palace chief spokesperson. No holds-barred exposition of raw, authentic African tradition



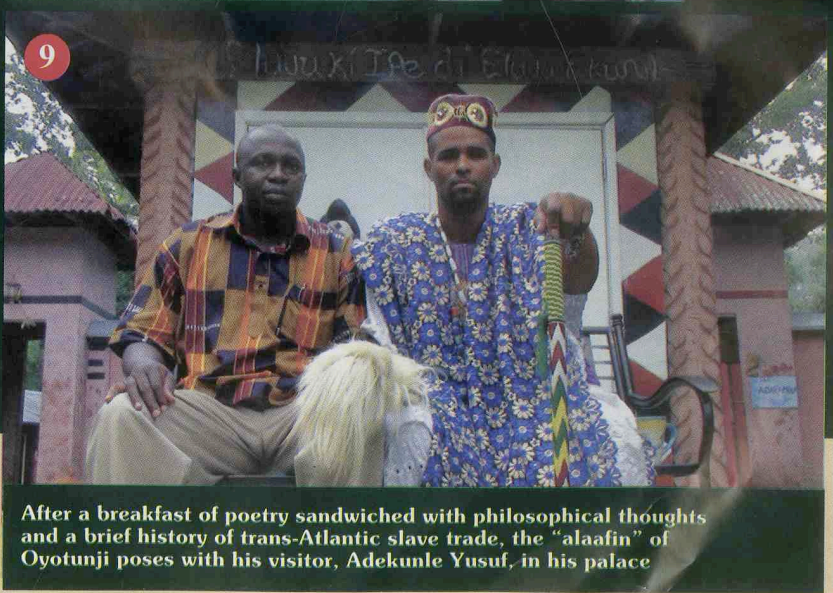
7

Old Africa recreated in Uncle Sam's jungle



8

Robust support for a robust culture



9

After a breakfast of poetry sandwiched with philosophical thoughts and a brief history of trans-Atlantic slave trade, the "alaafin" of Oyotunji poses with his visitor, Adekunle Yusuf, in his palace

dressed in a flowing and well-embroidered agbada, joined the fray. In a graceful style that can make many a traditional ruler in Yoruba land in Nigeria green with envy, the young 'Alaafin' of Oyotunji mesmerised his audience with his spectacular, well-measured dance steps, gyrating and swinging beautifully to exhilarating percussions wafting from the drums, which glued the crowd to the sight of his dignified traditional African dancing artistry.

At about 5pm, the celebration paused, only to resume at 8.30pm in the village's temple where the worshippers had converged for another round of

spiritual voyage that uncorked the core essence of their communing with their creator. Though this episode was also largely defined by dancing, intermittently interspersed with esoteric chants, it was more heavily signposted by increased spiritual ecstasy, supplications and prayers. Enscenced in his full regalia was Oba Adefunmi, surrounded by a coterie of priests and aides, showering royal blessings on his subjects.

# 'We Have Produced a Second Generation of Yoruba People in America'

– *Alaafin of Oyotunji, USA*

By **ADEKUNLE YUSUF**

He was not yet born when the unusual kingdom was founded in 1971. But 35-year-old **Oba Adegbolu Adefunmi II** is currently the Oloyotunji of Oyotunji, a Yoruba African village in South Carolina, United States. In 2005, he succeeded his father and first ruler of the community, late Oba Efuntola Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi I. Born in 1928 as Walter Eugene King into a Baptist family in Detroit, Michigan, late Oba Adefunmi led eight other visionary people who were dissatisfied with their Christian upbringing, thus finding a new religious expression in Yoruba tradition and religion which culminated in the founding of Oyotunji. In this interview with **Adekunle Yusuf**, the youthful Oba Adefunmi speaks on why the village has adopted the Yoruba culture and religion, what Oyotunji is out to achieve as well as challenges facing the kingdom.

**C**an you share with us the process that led to your coronation as the second Oba of Oyotunji?

When I was born in 1976, *Ifa* was consulted and in my birth reading came through that this particular child is a spirit of a king and would be the Oba of Oyotunji. As it is traditionally known, as one Oba passes away, another person takes over. I was interested in doing film and playing music; becoming an Oba was not something I looked forward to in my life, but I just believe it is a duty.

**In your own understanding, what is the main objective of establishing Oyotunji? What is it really out to achieve?**

The establishment of Oyotunji is of two fold. First, to have a place for African-Americans, who are disconnected from their culture and tradition so that they can see the African culture and how it is done because even the Europeans should see it. There are many types of people in this country and many of them have been to Oyotunji, like Japanese, Koreans, Muslims, Iraqis, and so on.

**By the way how is this place governed?**

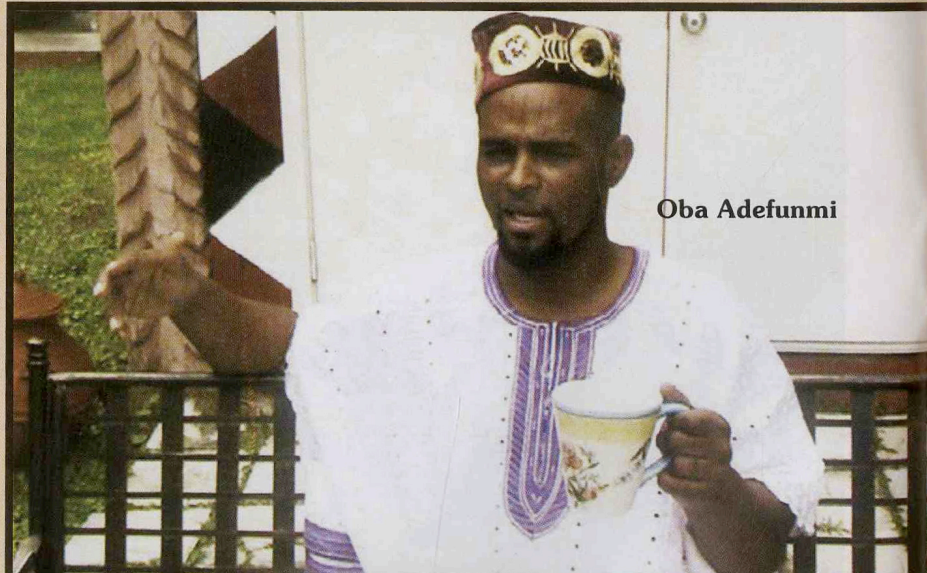
When they started Oyotunji, it was governed by the fathers and mothers in the community. And when the community decided that they wanted an Oba, Oba Adefunmi I was chosen as the king of Oyotunji. So they crowned him as the Oba in 1972. What we have is a traditional parliament in which we have the Oba at the top, then the *Ogboni*, then the *Babas* and the *Yeyes* and the regular people in the town. So we have a caste system set up in terms of leadership in Oyotunji. The Oba and the chiefs are in charge and the other ones will take out the message, some will execute the punishment and there is the rules committee. Many

years ago, we had a sign that warned people that they were leaving the US (by coming to Oyotunji). It is being repainted now. It means that you are leaving the customs and laws of America, but when you come to Oyotunji it could be quite different. We practice the Yoruba customs and traditions in our rules and laws that govern marriage, life, and farming, and so on.

**Essentially, what differentiates Oyotunji from other parts of the United States?**

When you get married in Yoruba culture, it is quite different from when you get married in the Western culture. In the Western culture, a girl meets a guy and the guy meets a girl and they get married because they like each other. But in Yoruba culture, when a girl meets a guy and guy meets a girl, they go to *Ifa*. And if *Ifa* blesses the marriage and says it is a good thing to do, then the marriage will continue and you must go to the ancestors in whom you must bring out *egungun* and the family must be involved, in which you have to bring out the dowry for the wife. So, when a child is born in America, you have to take him home but in a Christian home, such child is taken to the church for Christ. In Yoruba culture, when a child is born, *Ifa* is consulted and there is *isomoloruko* or *ikomojade* where the child gets his name and the community vows that they will take care of the child and look after him or her.

**There are many ethnic groups in Africa with diverse**



Oba Adefunmi

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## Interview

### languages, cultures and traditions. Why adopt the Yoruba culture and tradition, (what are) the attractions?

According to the first king, they were looking for African culture and it just happened that Yoruba was the one they fell in love with. They travelled on and on, as far as Cuba. They found out that many people practice Yoruba culture. The culture has survived transatlantic slave trade and holocaust. Besides, Yoruba religion is one of the most famous religions from West Africa, which came with the Africans and their culture.

### How do you feel worshipping traditional gods in a Westernised society like the US? Don't people look down on you because of this?

People did not look down on us, saying that we practice different culture. They look at us differently but this is our culture and our tradition. And if they were intelligent enough to pick up books to investigate, they can find out that this is a viable culture and why it was taken from African culture. When our people criticise us, it makes us better, stronger and makes us know that we have more work to do in education. We need to educate people more in terms of where these things come from and what we do. We need to educate them because it is believed that anything African is bad.

### Many Yoruba deities attract sacrifices for propitiation. Doesn't offering of animals and other materials as sacrifices to the gods pose occasional clashes in a society that is very sensitive to animal rights and hygiene?

In the US, public prosecution law states that we will not prosecute or lock up or beat or enslave anybody because of religion. So here we have a system called freedom of religion in America, in which a person is allowed to practice his religion. That is what the law states. And with the help of *Orisa* and *Ifa*, we are able to navigate this far. It's clear, and that is probably why it is easier for animal rights people to understand with us. People can understand when you explain to them. Without explanation, they tend to believe you are doing something bad; that anytime you sacrifice an animal, it is devil worship and devil worshipping.

### How does the village generate funds for its administration and sundry activities?

Many of the people here are self-employed, including the Oba and the chiefs. Everybody uses Yoruba culture for one type of income or the other because your culture is going to be your selling point. It is going to teach you how to make money, and it is also like we are selling our culture. Europeans today they sell their culture. We have a guesthouse. When people come in to the guesthouse for a few nights, they pay. Also, people who come for tours also pay, including people who come for spiritual consultations. Oyotunji has a market area where residents generate money also. So, we have several avenues of generating funds at Oyotunji, which people can utilise to sustain themselves. Initially, Oyotunji was not meant to be an attraction for people to come every day and take a tour. But it's something that just happened, and when it happened, we made it open as

Photo by Adekunle Yusuf



Oba Adefunmi

***"Oyotunji is the first African American town in North America that is dedicated wholeheartedly to the ancestors and to the culture and the spirits of Africa. It is the first of its kind".***

an industry. So Oyotunji is a tourism industry that is very popular, and it attracts great deal of income throughout the year for the community members.

### The community has existed for 40 years now. What can you name as some of its achievements?

The major achievement of Oyotunji is the initiation of people into Yoruba priesthood. Over the years, thousands of people have come to Oyotunji to be initiated into the Yoruba culture. It does not mean that those people that were initiated into the culture are expected to preach, but they are custodians of the culture of Yoruba people. We have thousands of our priests all over America, practising this religion. So, Oyotunji has been a priest engine for quite some time and we at Oyotunji have produced a second generation of Yoruba people who have grown up as Yorubas, and who have children who are learning the Yoruba culture and religion. So, we look forward to continue the legacies of the Yoruba people. There are Yoruba priests that make people to remember the tradition and carry on the traditions of our ancestors. Also, Oyotunji is the first African American town in North America that is dedicated wholeheartedly to the ancestors and to the culture and the spirits of Africa. It is the first of its kind.

### How can you describe the relationship of Oyotunji with the parent Yoruba settlements in Nigeria and elsewhere?

We have a very lovely relationship, so many of us have travelled to Nigeria. The Yorubas are always happy to hear that something like this is going on in the United States. When we travelled to Nigeria (sometime ago), a lot of people were already waiting at the Murtala Muhammed Airport to meet us; we drew a lot of crowd because the United States does not show it and does not publicise to the world that there is a village that does this kind of thing. The Ooni of Ife has endorsed Oyotunji for many years. When my father went to the Ooni of Ife, he showed him what we are doing in United States and the Ooni of Ife was surprised and very excited. He decided to make the kingmakers to perform traditional rites for my late father many years ago, recognising him as an Oba when my father travelled to Ife in 1981. ■

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