We are devoted to *òrìsà*; as for you, serve your god,
but we will serve our *òrìsà*.

Olorisha (Orisha worshipper), 1877

CHAPTER 1 · Introduction

The philosophy of religion is generally understood to be the rational study of religious questions, including questions about the nature of god(s) and the place of mankind within the universe. Is there a god (or gods) and, if so, what can we know of the nature of the god(s) and his/her/its/their interactions in the world of humanity? Does our understanding of the nature of the god(s) affect our understanding of ourselves and our relationship with others? This study is also often called upon to answer questions of human meaning: Why am I here? What am I meant to do? Is there an ultimate meaning to human life in general and my life in particular? These philosophical and theological questions blend into questions of morality and ethics: How does one determine right from wrong action, and how does one decide on appropriate actions in the face of ambiguity? Ethics naturally leads to questions of theodicy: Why do evil people prosper while the good are left to suffer? And

what is the appropriate religious response in the face of the evil in our lives and the lives of others? Underlying these questions of theodicy is a particular understanding of the nature of the gods. We ask, specifically, if god (or the gods) is good and just, why is there evil in the world?

These questions can extend beyond the nature of deity to ask not only why evil exists in general but also why evil strikes when and where it does. Why does the whirlwind take the one and leave the other? Such questions lead to more personal questions that can be summarized by the cry, Why me! Why am *I* made to suffer, and what can I do to alleviate my own propensity toward suffering? These questions lead in turn to questions of destiny: Is there a reason why I am here, at this place and in this time? Does my life have meaning beyond the needs of day-to-day existence? If there is a meaning to my life, how do I discover my destiny? And, if destiny can be manipulated, how might I assure the most positive destiny for myself and those I love?

Although within the Western philosophical tradition these questions have generally been asked and answered from the dominant male perspective, contemporary women have entered the fray, asking and answering these questions from their own perspectives. Thus one must ask one final set of questions: How do our ideas of god (or the gods), human beings, and their interactions change in the light of gender awareness? Does the normative male perspective incorporate the thinking and experiences of both men and women? If not, how does the experience of women change our understandings of the great philosophical and theological questions?

The Male as Normative

Much philosophical thinking assumes what is known as the "normative male perspective." Not only are the major thinkers across traditions men, but the descriptions of both the gods and human beings imply that maleness is the base case—that is, the gods and the people incorporated into philosophical thinking are presumed to be male unless they are specifically identified otherwise. In her 2003 article in *Cross Currents*, Rita M. Gross says that this preference for maleness over femaleness is one of the most deeply rooted problems in our cultural psyche and that it is "probably due in part to religious symbol systems that contain deeply misogynist elements and personify the most valued and ultimate symbols as masculine" (12). This has led, she says, to a belief that what is male is "normal," that everything deviating from stereotypical maleness is abnormal, and that men are unencumbered by gender, since gen-

der is one of those characteristics that distinguish some human beings as outside the (male) norm. This deep-seated preference for characteristics that have been culturally constructed as male over those that have been constructed as female as well as over other cultural gender constructions has led to a general acceptance of women who want to act like men but a continued abhorrence of men who take on any characteristic that has been culturally defined as "female."

My intention in this book is to explore these issues of gender through the lens of the philosophy and practices of the Orisha traditions as they have developed in the Americas. My analysis of the beliefs and practices of the devotees of the Orisha suggests that, unlike the mainstream religions Gross alludes to, they exist within a female-normative system in which all practitioners, regardless of their own understandings of their sex or gender or sexual orientation, are expected to take up female gender roles in the practice of the religion. Although there are instances in which male roles are expected of both men and women in the religion, the more common situation is the adoption of female roles. How, then, might our perceptions of the philosophical and theological questions raised above be changed in a system that valorizes the female over the male, and how might the lives of the individuals caught up in a female-normative system change?

If what Gross says is true—and I believe that it is—this book will be extremely difficult for both scholars and practitioners of these Orisha traditions, because it challenges not only Western theological traditions but also misogynistic attitudes within communities of practitioners. In one way or another the questions we will be exploring have challenged human beings for millennia. However, for the past two thousand years, they have been most systematically analyzed within the confines of the Western Christian milieu. Even when Europeans began to investigate the ideas of non-Western religious systems, they generally worked from within a Western Christian foundation, so that, having developed a highly sophisticated theology based on biblical and Western philosophical traditions, they viewed the new religious traditions they found in Asia and later in Africa and the Americas through the lens of their understandings of Christian theology. Thus the literature of encounters between Europeans and the Others they found around the world is full of attempts by those Others and their conversation partners to describe their religious ideas in Western philosophical and theological terms.

This book is not an attempt to continue that (generally discredited) project. Rather, it is an effort to formulate the beginnings of a theology of the contemporary Orisha traditions using the Western philosophical and theo-

logical categories while approaching them from a different perspective. Although I am striving to answer the questions posed above, I will do so from the point of view of one who has become immersed in the Orisha traditions. Generally these traditions in the United States are based on the Afro-Cuban religious complex known as Santería. As we will discuss, Santería is understood to be a syncretization of the Orisha traditions brought to the Americas by enslaved Yoruba-speaking people and the colonial Catholic traditions they found when they arrived in the Americas. Although that is a misrepresentation of the tradition, it is important to recognize that contemporary practitioners of the Orisha traditions in the United States, Cuba, and even Nigeria have all been influenced by the Western colonial project and are familiar with at least the popular rendition of Western Christian theological and philosophical concepts. At the same time, it is important for scholars and practitioners to gain an understanding of this tradition and the ways in which its foundational ideas are different from those found either in the Western monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam or in the various polytheistic or atheistic Asian traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, and the like. Perhaps an example of one of those fundamental differences will be helpful at this point.

Christianity and Islam are generally considered salvational religious traditions. This means that among the fundamental beliefs is that, when one dies, one's life is judged worthy of punishment or reward. There are no second chances in these traditions. Once one dies, judgment is made and one's fate is determined. Within Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand, the idea of samsara prevails. Within these traditions one is continually born and reborn, each death leading to a new rebirth. The reward for a good life is rebirth at a higher level. The ultimate reward is nirvana, a stepping off the wheel of rebirth and an extinction of the "self." (*Nirvana* is a Sanskrit word meaning "extinction.") Continuing to be born and reborn is always a penalty; the goal is to elude rebirth altogether. Although they are different in many ways, all of these traditions see human life ("this world") as miserable, and all look forward to a future that is different from the everyday. Like Buddhism and Hinduism, Yoruba traditional beliefs include an idea of reincarnation, a belief that those who have lived before will live again. Significantly, among the Yoruba, reincarnation is believed to generally follow the family line—that is, the dead are reincarnated as their own descendants, often their grand- or great-grandchildren. However, the more important way in which the Yoruba understanding of reincarnation is different from the Asian traditions is the understanding that rebirth is a *reward* for having lived a good life. There is no idea of rising through levels of social hierarchy or of an ultimate reward of eluding rebirth altogether.

Only the most evil and warped human being is denied rebirth within the Yoruba tradition. This leads to (or comes from) a valorization of this life—the viewpoint that, in spite of the hardships of day-to-day living, life is good, this is where we all want to be, and death is only a temporary respite between lifetimes. This was summed up for me in the proverb "Life in heaven cannot be pleasant, otherwise people would not live so long and come back so quickly."

Each of these positions about the afterlife leads to different ways of acting and thinking. Each provides a different basis on which to answer such great theological questions as: How am I to live? How am I to react to the inevitable ups and downs along the way? We will examine the ways contemporary Orisha worshippers are encouraged to answer these questions and the ways this idea and others like it inform their idea of the good life. At this point what is important is a recognition that such differences exist and that they can radically change one's view of the world.

Santería: A Brief Overview

> My curse be on ye for your disloyalty and disobedience, so let your children disobey you. If you send them on an errand, let them never return to bring you word again. To all the points I shot my arrows will ye be carried as slaves. My curse will carry you to the sea and beyond the seas, slaves will rule over you, and you their masters will become slaves.
>
> Prince Adebo

The Orisha traditions in the United States are known variously as Santería, Lukumi (sometimes spelled Lucumí), Ifá, Regla de Ocha (Sp., Rule of the Orisha),[1] Yoruba Traditional Religion, or Orisha Religion.[2] Although this book is written from the viewpoint of traditional Santería (Lukumi) practice, much of what is said here also applies to these variants of Yoruba-based religion as well as to the Brazilian tradition of Candomblé. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, thousands of Africans were brought from the west coast of Africa to the Americas to work as slaves on the plantations created by European colonists.[3] After 1762 when the English captured the Spanish port of Havana, and after the Haitian revolution of 1794, the European passion for sugared foods was increasingly met by sugar from Cuban plantations. Hundreds of thousands of Yoruba-speaking people were brought to the New World to work these plantations. By 1888 nearly 10 million African men and women had made the Middle Passage to the Americas. It is estimated that

between 500,000 and 700,000 of these Africans were brought to Cuba. During the final period of Cuban slavery, between 1850 and around 1870, slightly more than 34 percent of the slaves arriving in Cuba were designated as members of the Lukumi nation (actually the Yoruba language group), that is, Oyos, Egbas, Ijebus, and Ijeshas (Brandon 1993, 57–58, 55).

Although life on the sugar plantations numbed the mind and destroyed the body, slaves and former slaves living in the cities, notably Havana, had opportunities to learn trades and work for wages—and thus, according to long-standing Spanish law, to buy their own and their family's freedom. By the mid-nineteenth century more than one-third of the black population of Cuba were *gente de color* (Sp., [free] people of color), and they constituted one-sixth of the total population. For comparison, in Virginia at the same time free blacks were one-ninth of the black population and only one-thirty-second of the total population (Murphy 1993, 21–26; statistics from Klein 1967, 202, 236).

Even before the end of slavery, freed blacks and enslaved tradespeople living in the cities of Havana and Matanzas formed social clubs similar to the Spanish *cofradías* (brotherhoods), which they called *cabildos* from the word for church chapter house or town council.[4] These cabildos functioned not only as social clubs but also as quasi-political governmental bodies whose leadership was responsible for the behavior of their members to the Spanish city councils. By law and custom, the members of each cabildo were members of the same African "nation," whose dances, drum types, and songs were considered ethnically significant symbols. Since black servitude was known in Spain long before the discovery of the Americas, African-style drumming and dancing were better known and tolerated in Spanish colonies than in the English colonies of the New World.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Catholic Church tried to bring religion into these clubs by providing an image of the Virgin Mary to each club and assigning a clergyman to direct worship and teach Catholic doctrine. Through a policy of guided syncretism that included injecting an African flavor into European Christian rites, the church hoped to sweep the Africans into the mainstream of Cuban Christianity so that they would eventually forsake their African customs. As was common in Spain, the members of the Afro-Cuban cabildos took part in religious festivals by bearing their saints' images in public processions. It was during these festivals that African-style dances were performed under the banners and images of Catholic saints. Within the walls of these cabildos, Africans and Afro-Cubans brought their own organizational and religious structures into being in the colonial environment. Along with

their administrative functions, the cabildos also nourished distinctive religious functions separate from those provided by the Spanish clergy. In its Spanish form, the cabildo was responsible for the welfare of its members; in times of need, the cabildo provided clothes, medicine, charity, and a decent burial. The Afro-Cuban cabildos provided all these services to their members; however, most important for us, it was in these cabildos that scholars believe the Afro-Cubans were able to reconstruct their Orisha worship.

Among the Yoruba the worship of the Orisha tended to center on individual cult groups that worshipped either a single Orisha or a small number of related Orisha. While each lineage group had one or more deities accepted as "belonging" to that compound, in-marrying women and other "strangers" might bring additional deities to the compound. Any individual might worship a single Orisha, several, or none at all, although generally an individual worshipped five or six different deities (Bascom 1944, 23–24).

In Cuba the tradition of individual Orisha cults and lineage traditions could not be sustained.[5] Over time the founders of what was to become Santería reconstructed the Orisha cults into a single religious system in which all of the Orisha could be worshipped. Based on a tradition of cross-initiations, they established a system whereby a new priest was not only initiated into the cult of his or her ruling Orisha, he or she was also automatically initiated as a priest of a set of related Orisha. This style of initiation strengthened the developing religion, since the new priest would be able to initiate others not only into the cult of his or her primary Orisha but also into the cults of all the other Orisha received.[6]

Although much of the literature about this religion has been written from the viewpoint of male adherents, it is a religion that was organized and established during the cabildo period by women who based it on African religious traditions that were strongly female-identified. As Philip A. Howard suggests, in many cabildos the second most important officers were the *matronas* (matrons or queens). Although the slim literature on the early cabildos suggests that the responsibilities of these matronas was "more ceremonial than functional," we can suggest that these ceremonial roles were actually religious in nature (Howard 1998, 41, 42; see also Ortiz 1921, 6). In fact, Fredrika Bremer, a Swedish woman who traveled throughout the Americas in the 1800s, made the startling observation, "These cabildoes are governed, as I have already said, by queens, one or two, who decide upon the amusements, give tone to the society, and determine its extension. They possess the right of electing a king, who manages the pecuniary affairs of the society, and who has under him a secretary and master of the ceremonies" (Bremer 1853, 381; for a more acces-

sible source, see Brown 2003, app. 1). According to Santería oral traditions, several women were influential in the early development of this new religion. Two who deserve special notice are Minga Latuan, a priest of Shango initiated in Africa, who arrived in Cuba in or around the 1840s, and María Towá, who has been called Queen of the Lukumi. These women are credited with instituting the position of *oriaté* (ritual specialist and diviner) and making the ritual that has come to be called *cuchillo* (Sp., knife) available to all priests. These two innovations are discussed in chapters 3 and 4 respectively. As we shall see, the Yoruba idea that the female is the ideal religious type continues to be manifested in the religious practice of contemporary practitioners of Santería.

Although tolerated early on, the cabildos and their members were severely oppressed during the early decades of the twentieth century as Cuba gained its independence from Spain (1895), established itself as a republic (1902), and was occupied by American troops twice (1898 and 1912).[7] Even though Cuba's republican constitution allowed for freedom of religion, Santería and Cuba's other African-based cults were persecuted during the period in an effort to "civilize" its citizens. However, the efforts to suppress these religions were unsuccessful, so that when Cuban refugees immigrated to the United States in the 1960s (after the revolution) and again in 1980 (the Mariel boatlift) they brought their African-based traditions with them. Here they have flourished in spite of continued opposition on a variety of fronts. Today estimates suggest that there are more practitioners of the Orisha traditions in the United States than in either Cuba or Nigeria.

The Nature of Deity

Western understandings of the nature of deity and the meaning of the word "God" are based on Hebraic thought as captured in the books of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles (the Old and New Testaments) and the Greek philosophical traditions.[8] This groundwork has been extended and refined by two thousand years of Christian theology and Euro-American philosophy. Most explorations of non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions continue to use the categories of thought developed within these theological and philosophical traditions, especially when the target traditions do not have a well-defined indigenous philosophical tradition. Embedded within these Eurocentric traditions is the view that "God" is the name given to the Ultimate Reality, a being who created and sustains the world, who acts as the protector and savior of individuals and nations challenged by evil. This being is the central object of worship and acts as the final arbiter for all human morality.

Often the biblical account describes God in anthropomorphic terms as a kingly figure with arms and legs as well as feelings and desires, as one whose will and mind engender purposive and creative actions. Examples of godly action include both constructive and destructive behavior: both the flooding of the entire earth and the protection of Noah and his family, for example. According to Christian understandings God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and absolutely moral; this godly morality is the standard against which all human action is measured and found wanting.

In addition to describing God in anthropomorphic terms, the biblical tradition uses abstract metaphors to describe the nature of God. In this view God is the beginning and the end of creation, everywhere present but untouchable, unknowable. Whereas the anthropomorphic metaphors bring God closer to his human subjects, the more abstract metaphors tend to emphasize the absolute difference between God and humanity. These metaphors express the nature of God as unique, eternal, absolutely Other.

Use of Greek philosophical thought further refined this second notion of God as an ideal being. Based on Platonic and Neoplatonic theories, God as the most perfect being must not be dependent on any other being, must be changeless, eternal, and unitary. However, these Greek notions of the immutable nature of God challenged the Christian belief in the Incarnation, the doctrine that God entered into the natural world through the person of Jesus. How could a unitary, unchangeable deity enter into time and be subjected to the vicissitudes of matter? This difficulty was finally resolved through the development of the most distinctive feature of Christian belief, the notion of the godhead as trinity—that is, as a union of three divine persons in one God. Much Christian theological thinking, particularly in the medieval period, was based on the need to resolve the differences between the God of revelation and philosophical concepts of what the nature of God should be.

In the modern and postmodern periods, theology was challenged in a different way by the alienation of the metaphysical from the natural world. Scientific theories and discoveries undercut theological notions about the origin and purpose of the material world and eliminated God from its order and design. This led to a more subjective theology. On the one hand, the godhead became defined in more abstract terms as the "ground of being," or "world-soul," and God became less static and more associated with the ongoing unfolding of the material world; on the other hand, thinking about the limitation of human knowledge relative to the godhead led to a negative theology (descriptions of what God is *not*) that suggested that God is ultimately unknowable.

Exposure to the cosmologies of non-Western peoples also drove theologians to ask what *kind* of God is found in Christianity. H. Richard Niebuhr suggested, among other things, that notions of God's transcendence undercut all human idols, including the Christian "idols" of church, Scripture, and even Christ. In addition, he suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity protects Christianity from a one-sidedness. The God of the Trinity, he said, is a fuller conception of deity than a God identified only as father, or only as son, or only as Holy Spirit (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998, 149). In addition, feminist theologians, many of whom are familiar with the female deities of other traditions, have questioned the exclusively male-gendered imagery traditionally associated with the Christian godhead. Many have suggested that such images reinforce patriarchal cultural institutions. In an attempt to rectify such an imbalance, they have both drawn on the female imagery available within the Judeo-Christian tradition—for example, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's use of the feminine Sophia-God from the Hebrew Bible—and offered alternative images, such as Sallie McFague's reinterpretation of the Trinity as mother, friend, and lover (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998, 149).

All of these notions of the nature of God and the appropriate ways to discuss and describe it either overtly or covertly influence accounts of non-Western, particularly indigenous, religious systems. Most practitioners and scholars of Orisha religions base their understanding of the religious cosmos of the Yoruba on the work of the Nigerian scholar and churchman E. Bolájí Ìdòwú. Ìdòwú was the first patriarch of the Methodist Church of Nigeria and as such "played a key role in shaping and applying the concept of Indigenous African Christianity" (Ebisi 1994, vii). *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, Ìdòwú's foremost work, was a revision of his doctoral thesis defended at the University of London in 1955. Basing his thought on the idea that the living God would have revealed Himself in some (perhaps imperfect) way to all people at all times, Ìdòwú posited that "God has spoken from the very beginning to every heart of all the peoples of the earth—all the peoples whom He has made and set in their places on the face of the earth—in a way which each understands" (Ìdòwú 1994, 31). Using his Christian theology as a foundation, Ìdòwú states authoritatively that "God is One, not many; and that to the one God belongs the earth and all its fullness. It is this God, therefore, Who reveals Himself to every people on earth and Whom they apprehended according to their knowledge of Him" (31). Ìdòwú goes on to describe Olodumare, the Yoruba "high god," according to classical theological criteria: he is the Prime Mover (32) or creator (39), the fountain of all benefits (53); he is the unique and incompa-

rable King who dwells in the heavens (40); he is Omnipotent, All-wise, All-knowing, All-seeing (40, 41); he is the author of each person's destiny (53) and the final judge and disposer of all things (42); he is immortal, unchanging (42), and invisible (44); and he is holy, transcendent, and benevolent (46, 47).

Olodumare is not, however, alone. As Ìdòwú points out, it is not the worship of Olodumare that forms the basis of traditional Yoruba religion; rather it is the many divinities, called Orisha, who are the focus of the ritual attention of the Yoruba people and their religious descendants. Thus, although Ìdòwú describes Olodumare as similar to the Christian God, he must describe Yoruba religion as a "diffused monotheism"—that is, a monotheism that has been "attenuated through the many divinities [Orisha] whose cults form the objective phenomena of the religion" (204).

In Ìdòwú's view, the Orisha are the "ministers" of Olodumare who serve as mediators between Olodumare and humanity. But other researchers have questioned Ìdòwú's hierarchical model. Pierre Verger, the French anthropologist, suggested that the Orisha are actually separate and fully functioning deities more or less independent of Olodumare. Thus, he said, rather than describing the Yoruba cults as some sort of pantheism, they should more correctly be described as juxtaposed theisms or even juxtaposed monotheisms (McKenzie 1976, 190–91, quoting Verger 1957, 11, and Verger 1966, 24). Further, he suggested that the idea of *ashé* as "the vital power, the energy, the great strength of all things" (Verger 1966, 35) and not the idea of Olodumare best represents the Yoruba idea of God as the unknowable force that sustains the universe (38).

Based on his reading of Verger and extending Verger's conclusion from Yoruba cult groups to Santería, Joseph Murphy (1993) suggests that the world of the *santero* (Sp., Santería devotee) is a world constituted of and held together by ashé. He describes ashé as the movement of the cosmos toward completeness and divinity (130). It is "all mystery, all secret power, all divinity." It is without beginning or end; it cannot be enumerated or exhausted. It is not a particular power but Power itself (147n7, citing Verger 1966, 36; see also McKenzie 1976).

This view of ashé as the organizing power of the universe could lead to the understanding that Yoruba religion is monistic, or based on the belief that there is a single substance, ashé, underlying all of existence. Although it is possible to describe Olodumare as the personification of this underlying substance, a strict monism would be a-theistic: the substance underlying everything would be not an individual or personal being, but rather a force. This

formulation would demote Olodumare from being the "high" god, as commonly perceived, to being merely one of the manifestations of the monistic substance.

The understanding that ashé encompasses every part of the visible and invisible worlds, that it is more than can be personified or portrayed, also leads to a religious viewpoint that eschews religious representations, particularly anthropomorphic representations. The Yoruba have never seen ashé and do not pretend to personify it. Thus, although we can suggest that Olodumare is the personification of ashé, we find no representations of Olodumare in either traditional Yoruba religion or its American variants.

In the Yoruba and Santería cosmological view ashé, the energy of the universe, is not homogeneous; it collects and forms into nodes of power we recognize as forces of nature (wind, the ocean, thunder), power sites (rivers, mountains), and aspects of human life (our roles as mothers, kings, warriors). In the Yoruba traditions these forces have been anthropomorphized and mythologized into a group of beings or demigods called the Orisha. The Orisha are multidimensional beings who represent the forces of nature, act as archetypes, and function as sacred patrons or "guardian angels." As the personifications of ashé and knowable aspects of Olodumare, they represent a level of power that is approachable through ritual action and so provide one very important focus for Yoruba religion (Lawson 1984, 57). And even though the Orisha are viewed as particular manifestations and personifications of ashé, a bit of this power seen in one of its numerous aspects (Verger 1966, 36), research suggests that the Yoruba were unlikely to create anthropomorphic representations of any divine beings. Thus, although the Orisha are represented in the mythology as having human characteristics, they are more likely to be represented by natural and manufactured goods than by statues or other sorts of images.[9]

The Orisha do have attributes and stories similar to the stories and attributes used to describe the ancient Greek and Roman deities. Their stories tell us how the world came to be the way it is (for example, why thunder and wind are often found together) and how to live a good life (sometimes you can persuade better with honey than with a sword). However, unlike the Greek gods, the Orisha are not remote deities living high on a mountain peak; rather they are living beings present in the everyday life of their followers. It is around the Orisha that most Yoruba and Santería religious activity focuses. In fact, as Peter R. McKenzie says (1976, 197), "the extraordinary richness of Yoruba religion lies in the profusion of its òrìsà, in the facility with which in the past an òrìsà has formed and gathered about itself a cult group."