

FREEDOM OF YORUBA IFA SANTERIA RELIGIOUS

EXERCISE IN PRISON

PP THE PUERTO RICAN JAILHOUSE LAWYER PP

El Grito de
Lares
ILE
OLODUMARE

N-150
-D-
CORA
Yoruba Lukumi
Hato Rey P.R.

Biembe
-D-
Las Gladiolas

3

OGUN



Vladimir Correa-Ayala
-D-
Quintana



DATE: October 6, 2019

NAME: Bienvenido Rodríguez, Jr.

This is my story based on first-hand experience and struggles challenging the Pennsylvania State Department Of Corrections (Pa.SDOC) blanket ban on my "Freedom Of Yoruba Ifá Santería Religious Exercise In Prison!"

First of all I am a "Puerto Rican Jailhouse Lawyer"; a "Professional Tattoo Artist" and a "Barber." I was born in Brooklyn, N.Y. and raised in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico in a Caserío (Housing Project) called: "Residencial Las Gladiolas!"

As a child, I have been initiated into the "Yoruba Ifá Santería" religious faith by my grandmother. I was initiated under the mysteries of an African god (Orisha Ogún). I received the first initiation of the "Orisha Elegues" (Orisha Beaded Necklaces). As a teenager, I received the initiation of "Los Guerreros" (The Warriors). When I received the first initiation of the "Orisha Elegues" (Orisha Beaded Necklaces), my grandmother gave me five necklaces of multicolored beads; one necklace of Orisha Eleguá, one necklace of Orisha Obatalá, one necklace of Orisha Changó, one necklace of Orisha Yemayá, and one necklace of Orisha Oshún. When I received my second initiation, my grandmother brought me to a town in Puerto Rico called: "Loiza Aldea" where I received the initiation of "Los Guerreros" (The Warriors) conducted by a Babalawo which are only to be High Priests and must be strictly male, and conducted under stringent vows of secrecy that is no longer necessary during these days. Los Guerreros consist of three of the most powerful Orishas in Yoruba Ifá Santería: Orisha Eleguá, Orisha Ogún, and Orisha Ochosi. Orisha Eleguá is received in the form of a cement head with eyes, mouth, nose, and ears formed from "Dilogún" (Cowrie Shells). On Mondays Orisha Eleguá is offered a mint candy, a coconut, a cup of black coffee, a cup of fresh water, a cup rum, a lighted cigar, a white candle lighted to his image, Manteca De Corojo is rubbed on Orisha Eleguá's image, three pennys are placed in front of his image as the number three is Orisha Eleguá's sacred number, a toy car is placed in front of his image as Orisha Eleguá is a child-like Orisha, and the "Orisha Elegues" (Orisha Beaded Necklaces) are also rubbed with a mixture of Agua Florida and Manteca De Corojo, and cigar smoke is blown upon the necklaces followed with an Orisha prayer in Yoruba to invoke the Orishas protection and blessings. Orisha Eleguá always has a red parrot feather and a tiny blade protruding from the top of his head.

Orisha Ogún and Orisha Ochosi are received inside a black cauldron represented by Orisha Ogún's sacred implements such as a machete, a rake, a spade, an awl, a pick, a hoe, and also Orisha Ochosi's sacred implement is received inside the cauldron which is a crossbow. These are the seven sacred implements of Orisha Ogún as the number seven is also Orisha Ogún's sacred number. Orisha Ogún is the owner of the prisons and is the absolute symbol of justice. Orisha Ochosi is a hunter, and he also has judicial and administrative powers, so that people who find themselves in trouble with the police, or who are facing trial, often invokes his protections in overcoming legal problems. Orisha Ochosi's sacred number is also seven. Orisha Eleguá's sacred colors are black and red, Orisha Ogún's sacred colors are black and green, and Orisha Ochosi's sacred color is violet.

In Yoruba Ifá Santería we are strictly forbidden from indulging in criminal activities, which was something that I did not adhere to. I eventually failed to complete other initiations such as "El Cuchillo" (The Knife) and "El Asiento" (The Chair), also known as "Hacer El Santo" (Make The Saint), and growing up in poverty stricken Puerto Rico government run-down Housing Projects; where drugs, murder, violence, reggeaton maleanteo, and reckless sex became my new religion. I committed apostasy in Yoruba Ifá Santería. The Orishas have given me too many opportunities in life. I have been called upon in mysterious ways that I have failed to recognize. I kept ignoring the calls. The calls of the Orishas are by way of punishments. I have been called by the Orishas by way of numerous imprisonments in the prisons of Puerto Rico. I have been called by the Orishas by way of people tempting against my life numerous times. The Orishas are swift and strict disciplinarians.

Here I am today with (42) years of age, and a slave to the penal system. My grandmother once again had prepared my "Orisha Elegues" (Orisha Beaded Necklaces) and had prepared my "Baño" (Ritual Cleansing Bath) and told me for the last time in the year 2013: ("Frutito, if you continue to live this lifestyle you will be in prison again for a long time and may possibly die in prison. But if you end up in prison, don't give up and abandon Santería again. You must invoke the Orishas and always give them their rightly offerings in prison or you will die in prison.")

I ignored my grandmother's "Consulta" (Consult). I started to go on a rampage by robbing everything

moving such as drug dealers, barber shops, tattoo shops, bodegas, nail saloons and pawnshops. You name it. Where ever there was cash I was coming for it to support my drug addiction. The ugly part of it was committing these crimes while I was wearing my sacred "Orisha Elegues" (Orisha Beaded Necklaces). This was the gravest sin in Yoruba Ifa Santeria.

I got locked up with my "Orisha Elegues" (Orisha Elegue Beaded Necklaces), and when I came "Up State" my Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces of Orisha Elegua and Orisha Ogun were destroyed by the Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution's prison officials at SCI Graterford, because they claimed that my Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces were gang beads, and they attempted to associate the colors of the beads as me being affiliated with what the Pa.SDOC had already labled me as being a gang member. The Pa.SDOC claimed that the beads were Neta gang related, which was totally absurd. The Pa.SDOC often discriminates against us Hispanics, and the Pa.SDOC prison officials tend to only focus on what they perceive as exciting ~~like~~ like a Hispanic male with cultural tattoos, gunshot wounds, scars, militant, and strong; to Pa.SDOC we are gangs, violent, animals, uncivilized, ignorant, inferior, and SLAVES. Us Hispanic prisoners in the American prison system are most often mis-judged according to what is most visible to the eyes of the prison officials. My appearance to prison officials' eyes gave me a dangerous gang lable in my prison record (Initial Review Committee Questionnaire) without me ever saying a word, and without a Security Threat Group Validation Hearing. Bad for parole hearings. But back to the subject matter. My Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces were tossed in a near-by trash-can. I went to the trash-can to pick it up; which the Lieutenant took it as an act of aggression. With the Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces in my hand, and in anger I attempted to articulate the history behind the Yoruba Ifa Santeria religion, the precepts of the obligatory practices, and the religious significance behind the wearing of the Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces and the color combination of the beads. It fell on deaf ears and the Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces were destroyed. Never in my life have I ever allowed any human being to disrespect me to this extent without facing some type of punishment for trespassing the limits of my boundaries. To defile Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces in this manner is like destroying a Muslim's Holy Qur'an in Islam. At this point I felt like my religious identity had been stripped away. To make matters

worse, I was given a misconduct DC-141 for picking up my Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces from the trash-can in defiance of the Lieutenant's direct order not to pick up my Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces from the trash-can. I was sent to the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) for standing up for my First Amendment United States Constitutional right to ~~exercise~~ Freedom Of Yoruba Ifá Santería Religious Exercise In Prison. By locking me down in the RHU on my first day Up State was a "Willie Lynch" tactic to break my psychological state of mind, to tear me down spiritually and culturally in a humiliating manner. At this point I sat in my cell by myself because I refused to take a Cellmate. I was sitting on my bunk just pondering on what I did wrong. My grandmother's words began to echo in my mind in part: ("But if you end up in prison, dont give up and abandon Santería again. You must invoke the Orishas and always give them their rightly offerings in prison or you will [die] in prison.") I started to feel what it was like to be held captive in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba Military Prison Camp and being denied my right to practice Yoruba Ifá Santería religion by American Military soldiers. I felt the same spiritual pain that Muslims suffered at the hands of their captives. The treatment that the Muslims endured at Guantanamo Bay Military Prison Camp is no different in Pennsylvania State Prisons, especially in the Special Management Unit (SMU) where I am held captive at SCI Forest.

So there I was in the RHU at SCI Graterford L-Block where I began to study the Pa. SDOC's prison policy; the U.S. Constitution; case laws; Federal Rules of Civil Procedures; State Rules of Civil Procedures; Black Laws Dictionary; United Nations Declarations of Human Rights; Standard Minimum Rules For The Treatment of Prisoners commonly known as the Nelson Mandela Rules or the (Mandela Rules), named after Nelson Mandela, who spent decades in prison in South Africa because of his opposition to apartheid. I also studied Human Rights legal materials such as the International Covenant On Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as well as the Inter-American Commission On Human Rights; which, during this present time and date of Trumpism we need to begin to start utilizing in the prison systems in the U.S. these Treaties that the U.S. has signed and ratified to enforce Human Rights in the United States American prison systems. Isolation has made me very conscience

about Human Rights, such as the Human Rights of my robbery victims. Solitary Confinement has made me conscience of all Human Rights - not just the rights in the U.S. Constitution and Court Opinions, but in the United Nations Charter and the Treaties that I have mentioned above, and in the Organization of American States Charter, which many of the "Jailhouse Lawyers" across the Nation are not aware of. Solitary Confinement made me a "Jailhouse Lawyer!"

In the RTHU I began to order Pa. SDOC policies. The first two policies that I ordered was the DC-ADM 804, Inmate Grievance System Procedures Manual, and the DC-ADM 819, Religious Activities Procedures Manual. I filed an 804, Official Inmate Grievance for the destruction of my Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces alleging First Amendment U.S. Constitutional violations; Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act 42 U.S.C. § 2000 cc-1 violations, and Pennsylvania Administrative Code § 93.6 Religious Activities violations. I requested that my Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces be replaced of the same colors that was destroyed. My grievance was denied as well as my grievance appeals. I also filed an 819, Religious Accommodation Request Form Non-Grooming, Section 4 - (Attachment 4-A) requesting that I be allowed the following:

- 1.) To be permitted to purchase and wear at all times colored sacred consecrated Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces of Orisha Elegua' (black and red beads), and Orisha Ogún (black and green beads);
- 2.) To be permitted to purchase colored sacred consecrated Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces from religious stores called "Santería "Botánicas";
- 3.) To be permitted to conduct and attend Yoruba Ifá Santería religious group studies and group worship on Mondays;
- 4.) To be permitted to perform the sacred religious cigar smoke puffing and blowing ceremony on Mondays;
- 5.) To be permitted to construct an African Orisha "Bóveda" (Shrine) consisting of images of the African Orisha Elegua', Orisha Obatalá, Orisha Changó, Orisha Oshún, Orisha Yemaya, Orisha Babalú-Ayé, Orisha Ojá, Orisha Ochosi, Orisha Ogún, Orisha Orula, and Orisha Aganyú as well as images of the Catholic Saints identified with their African Orisha counterparts;

6.) To be permitted to make food offerings such as fruits, mint candies, cup of coffee and cup of water on Mondays for African Orisha offerings;

7.) To be permitted to purchase and wear Sacred White "Orisha Moyuba Gorro" (Prayer Cap) and a Sacred white "Orisha Moyuba Pañuelo" (Prayer Headkerchief);

8.) To be provided with information of Santeros/as and Babalawo priests to assist in obtaining a volunteer for Yoruba Ifá Santería religious services;

9.) To be permitted to participate in the obligatory observation of the January 6 "Three Wise Kings Feast Day," and

10.) To be permitted to purchase a religious bible called: Santería The Religion, By: Migene Gonzalez Wippler.

Eventually the prison chaplain recommended denial of every single religious accommodation request, and the Pa.SDOC Religious Accommodation Review Committee at Central Office ultimately denied every single religious accommodation request that I requested on my Religious Accommodation Request Form, raising security concerns and exaggerating fears, attempting to equate Yoruba Ifá Santería as a Hispanic Neta and Latin King religious gang organization. When I received the Religious Accommodation Review Response and I read it, I was angry and I felt hopeless. I said to myself: ("Just file another grievance, oppose the denial and keep fighting with pen and paper.") So I moved right along and filed a DC-804, Official Inmate Grievance challenging the obvious deprivation of my Yoruba Ifá Santería religious freedom and the clear discrimination against Yoruba Ifá Santería religion. I received a grievance Initial Review Response. It was unbelievable to read the words: ("Your grievance is Denied.") I appealed the decision to the Superintendent. Guess what? My appeal was denied. I appealed again to Final Review. Must I repeat the words again? Of course my Final Appeal was denied. When I read the word (DENIED) on my Final Appeal Response, I said to myself: ("I can't just let this go, because it is my religion and I have a right to practice it.") You know, I felt like I was re-living the days of the African Yoruba Slave Trade introduced by the Spaniards when in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Hispaniola (present day Dominican Republic and Haiti) the African Yorubas were brought to these Spanish dominated Caribbean Islands and

were forced to learn Catholicism, and were forbidden to practice their native "Yoruba Ifá" religion. I felt like the Pa.SDOC was imposing a modern form of a "Spanish Inquisition" type of policy upon me. I moved a step further and I filed a Section 1983 Civil Action against the Pa.SDOC corrections prison officials and prison chaplains. See *Bienvenido Rodríguez V. Rev. Ulli Klemm et al.*, 2:16-cv-01780-MPK (W.D. Pa., Nov. 28, 2016) The case was settled on April 26, 2018, but the Pa.SDOC kept violating the terms of the Settlement Agreement, so I kept pressing the violations of the terms of the agreement with the Federal Courts, and prison chaplains and prison administrators were not happy that I kept fighting for my religion to be recognized in the Pennsylvania State prisons, and give it equal footing with mainstream religions. As a result, I was transferred to the Special Management Unit on trumped-up bogus misconducts, with the aims of keeping me locked-down in retaliation; as the Pa.SDOC fears the presence of my influence in general population may increase either in any Pa. State prison. Prison officials believe that I am a Security Threat Group member with a violent institutional history, and that in every institution I land on I begin to act in a leadership role that the Pa.SDOC finds concerning, because they claim that I have been recruiting Hispanic prisoners to follow me. I find it bizarre how a Government Agency such as the Pa.SDOC would go out of their professional Code of Conduct to violate my freedom of religious exercise by humiliating me in defiling my sacred Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces; label me as a gang member due to my cultural tattoos and my religious beliefs; destroy my Orisha Elegue beaded necklaces; locked me down in the RTHU; deny every single Yoruba Ifá Santería request; assassinate my character; violate the terms of the Settlement Agreement, and now lock me down indefinitely in the Special Management Unit (SMU) all because I want to practice my Yoruba Ifá Santería religion, which clearly indicates the Pa.SDOC's intent to suppress my religious practices of a non-mainstream faith in Pennsylvania that is frequently feared and misunderstood.

In-deed, in 1993 Yoruba Ifá Santería religion was accorded First Amendment United States Constitutional protections, and the religious practices were recognized by the United States Supreme Court. See *Church of The Lukumi Babalú-Ayé V. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, 113 S.Ct. 2217, 124 L.Ed. 2d 472, see also *Campos V. Coughlin*, 854 F.Supp. 194, 212 (S.D.N.Y. 1994)

which is a Yoruba Ifa Santeria prison action relating to the same subject matters of my issues. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states in relevant part: ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;...") In the Constitution Of Pennsylvania, Article I, Declaration Of Rights, Religious Freedom, Section 3, it states: ("All men have a natural and indefeasible right to [worship] Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences; no man can of right be compelled to attend, erect or support any place of worship, or to maintain any ministry against his consent; no human [authority] can, in any case whatever, [control] or [interfere] with the rights of conscience, and no [preference] shall ever be given by law to any religious establishments or [modes of worship].") Also, in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18., it states: ("Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and [religion]; this right includes freedom to change his [religion] or [belief], and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to [manifest] his [religion] or [belief] in teaching, practice, worship and observance.")

Sometimes I ask myself if I am living in a different planet, because not even in the Puerto Rico Administration of Corrections' prison system would a Chinese prisoner who may practice Confucianism face such inhumane treatment by prison officials nor prisoners. I can say this because I've done time in the Puerto Rico prison system such as Anexo 308 Carcel Regional De Bayamon; Anexo 246 Ponce Las Cucharas; Anexo 1072 Carcel Regional De Bayamon just to mention a few. In the Puerto Rico prison system we have a Jailhouse Political Committee called "Association Pro-Rights For Convicts," where we have a right to vote during elections, and we advocate through the "Puerto Rican Jailhouse Lawyers Committee" for better conditions of confinement, ~~and~~ amongst other issues. So, with this said; regardless of the religions that we practice, the Pa.SDOC should be mindful that exposure to religions in prison is the only best chance of hope we have for rehabilitation as a prisoner. Most prisoners... like myself, will eventually be returning to the free community after years of punitive lock-down in solitary confinement units like the SMU, and being mistreated like a dog in a cage. It is equivalent to releasing a mad dog into a crowd of innocent civilians. That mad dog will bite everything moving. I have been blessed to understand the consequences of such mistreatment and oppression. Human Rights must be respected.

I believe that due to the African Yoruba Slave Trade when the Yorubas were brought from Nigeria to Cuba as slaves by the Spaniards, as mentioned before; the Yorubas were forbidden to practice Yoruba Ifá religion and were forced to learn Catholicism. The Yorubas in their effort to conceal their religious practices from the probing eyes of the Spanish slave Masters, they identified their African Orishas through the statues of the Catholic Saints. This is how Santería came about "the way of the Saints". So there you have it, us Yoruba Ifá Santería adherents in Cuba and Puerto Rico, as well as the Dominican Republic express our devotion to the African Orishas through the iconography of the images of the Catholic Saints. This is the main reason why the open practice of Yoruba Ifá Santería is still considered during these days by many Caucasian Americans in the free community, as well as in the American prison system a bizarre and wicked religion. For hundreds of years due to the great deal of the religious persecution, the African Yoruba slaves were forced to cloak the Yoruba Ifá religion in secrecy. At the time, it was necessary to create a code under stringent vows of secrecy in order for survival. During these days, this secrecy results in distrust, fear, and misunderstanding of Yoruba Ifá Santería by prison officials. Many Pennsylvania State prisoners that I have come across, have heard about Yoruba Ifá Santería, and have shown a sincere interest in learning about the religion, but are thereby deprived of the knowledge by my ongoing punitive transfers from state prison to state prison.

This clearly demonstrates that the Pa. SDOC needs to create a policy within the DC-ADM 819, Religious Activities Procedures Manual that provides factual information in regards to the history, teachings, practices, and religious texts of Yoruba Ifá Santería. We need a Yoruba Ifá Santería Religious Sensitivity Training Program for Pa. SDOC Religious Chaplains and Correctional Officers statewide to promote a better understanding of Yoruba Ifá Santería in the form of seminars. Unfortunately, I believe that the Pa. SDOC are not ~~inclined~~ inclined to do what is right, by my experiences dealing with such a corrupt system.

Solitary Confinement has become my educational system. In isolation I have learned to read and think rationally. I have learned to pick up and read books on world history, world religions, state law, Federal law, International law, and world revolutionary leaders.

In isolation I have come to understand that most of us who are locked-down in these Control Units are not because we are labled under the pretense of VIOLENT prisoners, but because we are dangerous with Pen and Paper as Jailhouse Lawyers, and a threat to the "Judicial Economy," and exposing the system, as it is, the (Pennsylvania State Department of Corruptions). In isolation I have come to understand that in order to change the conditions of confinement, us Jailhouse Lawyers need to create a Political Organization as a Jailhouse Political Party from the inside just like the Puerto Rican Jailhouse Political Committee (Association Pro-Rights For Convicts). In isolation I have become stronger, and I refuse to allow the fa.SDOC to psychologically chain me spiritually. Look at my art work! It supports the title of my story, and it depicts my battles as a Puerto Rican Jailhouse Lawyer of Taino Tribal Indian, and Yoruban Tribal descent; fighting the fa.SDOC to freely practice Yoruba Ifa Santeria religion, and to exercise such religion in prison.

I would like to pay homage to the following International revolutionary leaders, may they rest in peace:

Carlos Torres-Irriartiz; Trina Rivera De Rios; Pedro Albizu Campos; Lilita Lebron; Ramon Emeterio Betances; ~~Marina~~ Mariana Bracetti; Eduvigis Beauchamp Sterling; Simon Bolivar; Jose De San Martin; Fidel Castro; Ernesto Che Guevara; Nelson Mandela; Carlos Moralez-Feliciano, Malcolm-X, and Jose Marti.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the "American Prison Writing Archive." Thank you very much for offering me this opportunity to provide a first-hand testimony in regards to the conditions of confinement, and my experiences within the Pennsylvania Penal System. Please send me a copy of this work once it has been posted, and any copies of feedback on my work. You have authorization to publish and post my art work as a cover art to my story/essay.

