

Oyotunji Landscape Narratives: Stories of Place, Space & Spirit

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Project Description

The purpose of the Oyotunji Project is to explore the historical relationship between place, space and spirit by asking the following primary questions: 1) In what ways does the constructed environment reflect the political, cultural, and social identities of the earlier settlers and current religious affiliates? 2) How does the site function as a sacred text or scripture for African American Yoruba adherents? 3) What story does the land tell? The project documents the oral history surrounding the conversion of a ten-acre tract of swampland into a sacred landscape in low country South Carolina. Established in 1970 by a group of African American Yoruba practitioners, Oyotunji African Village has become historically significant as a landscaped expression of Black Arts Nationalism and Yoruba sacred worldview. It is a case study in landscape narratives and the constructed environment as a means of mediating sacred worldview along with political, cultural, and social identity. The intimate connection between Yoruba religion and Yoruba sacred landscape denotes the ways in which the shape of the environment encodes the shape of the sacred cosmos. This study suggests that the grounds and the constructed environment function in much the same way as sacred scripture, providing Yoruba practitioners with mythic material for the construction of self-understanding and worldview.

The founders of the Village were mainly brought up in African American Protestant denominations. Influenced by Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's they sought to reconnect with an ancestral past. Although relatively few descendants of Africans who arrived in America before the mid-20th century have Yoruba ancestry, Yoruba religion was well known in the New York cultural scene through the numerous *botanicas* offering ritual products and spiritual consultations. Oyotunji Village's founders sought to eradicate Catholic and Afro-Cuban influences in Yoruba religion and return it to what they envisioned as its pure African roots, and while in the process construct a separatist community based on those roots. As South Carolina still counted as "down home" for many whose parents and grandparents moved north in the Great Migration, it was an appropriate place to make a new, but also "old" home. Though historians have documented this general story, the personal stories and spiritual memoirs inherent in building a community from a swamp remain hidden. The Oyotunji Oral History Project will uncover these stories.

The project is designed to produce a photographic essay and narrative presentation of the grounds of Oyotunji African Village in Sheldon, South Carolina. Using oral history and photography as research methods, the final product will provide the general audience reader with a clear visual image of the current landscape architecture of the residential dwellings, as well as the shrines, altars, tombs, and spaces designated for ritual, ceremony and communal events, along with the story of how the land was transformed. This interdisciplinary project will make a contribution to several areas of study, including oral history, spirituality and landscape architecture, visual anthropology, religious studies, and African American religions. It points to the importance of "learning to see" and of recognizing the significance of personal narrative, material culture, space, and place in the study of religion.

Previous Research

Trained in oral history techniques at Columbia University, I have conducted oral history interviews in the area of African American religious practices for the past 14 years, focusing on African American engagements with sacred texts. This project is a continuation of the dissertation research that I conducted at Oyotunji Village between 1999 and 2004. During this time I interviewed 20 Yoruba practitioners who either lived at the Village or lived elsewhere and visited for special festivals and ceremonies. Though I was aware of the significance of the constructed environment, I focused primarily on practitioners' engagements with the Odu, the unwritten sacred texts of the Ifa/Orisha tradition of West African origin. But some of the

participants in my study mentioned that converting the swampland into a livable village required an incredible amount of hard work. This is what I want to revisit. Some of the original founders of the Village are now deceased, but a few remaining elders have first hand knowledge of this land conversion experience. I want to capture their stories and document this historical event while those who lived it can still share their personal narratives.

As a Summer 2011 Research Fellow in Garden and Landscape Studies at The Dumbarton Oaks Research Library in Washington, DC, I am currently in phase one of the project. This eight week program of focused study provides the opportunity to review the relevant literature, become familiar with landscape narrative and design practices and determine how to bring together narrative theory, oral history, photography, landscape theory and religious studies for a significant interdisciplinary project. The Charlton Oral History Research Award would provide the resources to advance my work to the next stage in the fall. I have identified several Yoruba practitioners who have some knowledge of the early settlement. I plan to interview the South Carolina residents in person, and will conduct phone interviews with those who live outside of the area.