

The Kingdom of Oyotunji

Summary: Oyotunji African village was founded in 1970 in Sheldon, South Carolina by Walter Eugene King. It is a religious and cultural community for African American practitioners of the West Yoruba faith. At its height, the village was home to over 200 people.

Along the road approaching Oyotunji African Village in Sheldon, South Carolina, a sign is posted in both Yoruba and English:

You are leaving the United States. You are entering Yoruba Kingdom. In the name of His Highness King Efuntola, Peace. Welcome to the Sacred Yoruba Village of Oyo Tunji. The only Village in North America built by Priests of the Orisha Voodoo Cults as a tribute to our Ancestors. These Priests preserve the customs, laws, and religion of the African Race.

Oyotunji Village was founded in 1970 by Walter Eugene King as a religious and cultural community for African American practitioners of the West African Yoruba faith. Its name means “Oyo rises again,” referring to the African Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, now rising in a new form near the South Carolina seashore.

King, a Detroit native, began studying Afro-Haitian and ancient Egyptian traditions as a teenager. He was further influenced by his contact with the Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe in New York City, an African American modern dance troupe that drew from many cultures within the African Diaspora. During a trip to Cuba in 1959, King became the first African American to be initiated into the *orisha* priesthood and became known as Efuntola Osejiman Adefunmi. After his return to the United States, he formed the Yoruba Temple in Harlem in 1960. The temple, committed to preserving African traditions within an American context, was the cultural and religious forerunner of Oyotunji Village.

With the rise of black nationalism in the 1960s, King began to envision the construction of a separate African American nation that would institutionalize and commemorate ancestral traditions. In June of 1970, he fulfilled this vision with the creation of Oyotunji African Village. It was during this time that he also established a new lineage of the priesthood, Orisha Vodou, to emphasize the tradition’s African roots. Today, over 300 priests have been initiated into this lineage and the African Theological

Archministry, founded by Osejiman Adefunmi in 1966, now serves as the umbrella organization for the Village.

In its early years, Oyotunji Village was home to as many as two hundred people. Today, its residential community consists of less than ten African American families, governed by an *oba* (king) and the community's appointed council. Each family is committed to the teachings of the Yoruba tradition, which include a religious understanding of the world as comprised primarily of the "energies" of the Supreme Being Olodumare, the *orisha* deities, and the ancestral spirits. This religious world is maintained spiritually through rituals, chants, music, sacrifice, and annual ceremonies. In 2005, Adejuyigbe Adefunmi II, the fourteenth of twenty-two children of Efuntola Osejiman Adefunmi, was appointed *oba* after his father's death.

Now more than forty years old, the Kingdom of Oyotunji African Village continues to sustain and promote an appreciation for the "depth of culture, beautiful art, grandeur of customs and resilient history of the New World Yoruba in the United States." Educational programs and resources are produced through the African Theological Archministry and disseminated through the institution's network of priests, priestesses, and other professionals. Oyotunji hosts festivals and a trader's bazaar, produces films and books, and offers spiritual services such as naming ceremonies and coming of ages rites.