

PRAYERS  
TO THE  
*ORISHAS*

A LOOK AT SANTERÍA



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# PRAYERS TO THE *ORISHAS*

## Introduction

Who owns your head? This provocative question means a great deal to many people around the world who practice a religion known as Santería, or alternatively (some people mind the previous name), *La Regla de Ocha*. This tradition originates among the Yoruba people of West Africa, in the area of present-day Nigeria. A great percentage of the slaves who were brought to the New World were Yoruban— according to David Brown of Emory University, 500,000 Africans were taken into Cuba between 1800 and 1870, and one third were Yoruban or from Yoruban-influenced areas.<sup>1</sup> According to Robert Farris Thompson, 40% of all Africans abstracted from Africa came from the Kongo and Angola regions.<sup>2</sup> This fact helps explain some of the traditions observable today in the United States, in the form of yard shows, bottle trees, words like “banjo”- “*mbanja*” and “goober” (peanut) - “*mgooba*”. Many popular dance and musical styles - the Charleston, jug bands, jazz - owe their origin to African ways preserved by the descendants of those Africans who survived the Middle Passage.

While it seems that the main body of the *Regla de Ocha* tradition points to Yoruban ancestry, the preceding information on the rich legacy of the Kongo traditions merits inclusion so that we do not forget the circumstances of this tradition’s prominent place in the New World. Today, *la Fé* (the Faith), or Santería, is essential to the national identity of Cuba, and practitioners live in Brazil, Panama, the Dominican Republic, the United States, Europe, and other countries. Also, in Haiti, one will see evidence of kinship between *Vodun* and *la Fé* of Cuba. The Africans who were brought to the New World as slaves adapted their traditions to the new environment - the condition of slavery, and the *codes noirs*, which were an effort to separate the spiritual and political leaders from their people and which forbade the practice of their religions; the new natural environment; and the mixing of African cultures with European cultures, which gave rise to the syncretized version of the Yoruban religion that has become Santería. The enslaved Africans gained strength to persevere and to resist through practicing their traditions. To paraphrase the words of Ifá priest Fagbemi John Turpin, from a lecture in which he referred to the plight of these newly arrived Africans: from the moral, ethical and spiritual understanding gained from their sacred traditions, they gained the strength

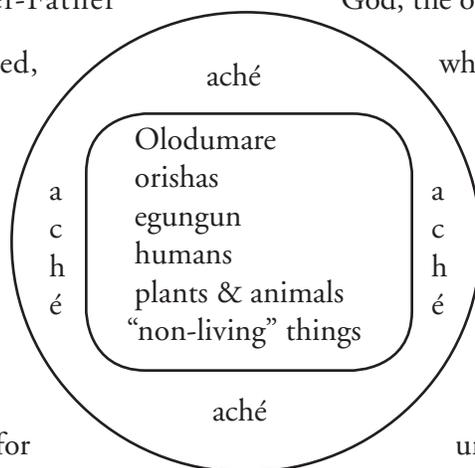
and maturity to resist the Middle Passage. They took what they had left behind and what they found, and used these to destabilize the yoke.<sup>3</sup>

As a final note of introduction to this discussion of Santería prayers to the orishas, I offer the following quote, which beautifully encompasses much of what I hope to make clear: Ashe, or aché, divination, deities, sacrifice, ceremony, chants, possession, and healing.

“It is ritual which allows humans to traverse all the categories of being through the manipulation and communication of ashe. The various forms of divination allowed people to have access to the accumulated wisdom of the deities and the dead as the paradigms for solving current problems. Offerings of food, objects, song, money, or the blood of animals in sacrifice all revived the ashe of the orisha and directed it toward specific ends. In ceremonial spirit possession, the link between the orisha and its descendants became palpable as, in ceremonies held in its honor, the immaterial being came down from on high and took over the body of one of its children, communicating to the assembly in a visible, physical, human form. Last but not least, it is the ashe in the priestess and the herbs, in the blood of the animal and the chants of praise and supplication, that heals the sick and forestalls death in rituals of affliction.”<sup>4</sup>

### Mythological beginnings

Olodumare is the Mother-Father God, the original creator of all things discovered and yet to be discovered, who remains somewhat remote from human kind and our doings. In the hierarchy of beings in Yoruba religion, Olodumare, or Olorún, owner of the skies and heavens, is at the top, followed by the Egungun, or the ancestors; next come humans, followed by plants and animals, and finally “non-living” things. This hierarchy is merely a rough outline for understanding ideas concerning the complex cosmological foundations of the religion. (Furthermore, this is a good place to note that within this short text, other explanations about the beliefs and practices of Santería may not include the full diversity and richness of the tradition, which has variations in its practice from place to



place, and across time.)

Surrounding and permeating everything is the spiritual force, energy, known as *aché*.<sup>5</sup> All powers are manifestations of this absolute and indefinable power.<sup>6</sup> Olodumare sent the *orishas* to form the Earth and to take care of things there. Each one had responsibilities for creation before leaving heaven. Oduwa (Odua) created the Earth and became the original ancestor of the Yoruba people. He began his work in Ile-Ife, which is accordingly regarded as a holy city.<sup>7</sup> The orishas became the rivers and streams, the mountains and hills, and some notable trees of Yorubaland, as well as other natural principles and elements such as lightning, thunder, wind, sudden change, the ocean, and the crossroads.<sup>8</sup>

### **Ifá: Philosophy and ethics of West Africa**

Ifá is the Yoruba system of cosmology, philosophy and divination, contained in a vast oral text. To perform divination, an Ifá priest, “father of the mysteries,” or *babalawo*, “casts a chain of eight halves of palm nuts or else sixteen separate nuts, and then reading the pattern of the cast, he marks the permutations on a tray covered with wood dust. Each permutation corresponds to an *odú*, or saying, of which there are 256. To each *odu* is attached a number of verses conveying a myth or story that points to the answer of the client’s problem.”<sup>9</sup> Through divination, *babalawos* can find out which *orisha* owns a person’s head.

According to Ifá texts, two pantheons of supernatural powers compete for domination of the universe: the “400 supernatural powers of the right,” the *orishas*, who are benevolent toward humans, and the “200 supernatural powers of the left,” the *ajogun*, who are malevolent.<sup>10</sup> *Eshu* is an aspect of *Eleguá*, who is one of the most powerful *orishas*. He is capable of changing his form at will, and acts as the impartial judge who mediates between the two factions. To accomplish his diplomacy, he uses sacrifices that are offered by humans who would otherwise be victims of the malevolent forces. Through the offering of sacrifices, human beings are able to resolve conflicts in the cosmos.<sup>11</sup> *Santeros* act upon this principle when they feed the *orishas* who manifest themselves through possession; divination also reveals the need for specific sacrifices of *ebo*, an animal sacrifice, or of *adimú*, an offering of food.

From Ifá comes *Orí*, the principle of predestiny, and the spiritual aspect of humans. *Orí* is also considered one of the *orishas*. The physical aspect of a human’s life is molded by *Obatála*. Before birth, humans select for themselves *Orí*, (the inner or spiritual head), which determine whether they will have good fortune

on earth. *Esè* represents the principle of struggle and self-help: one must work to bring the potential of one's *Ori* to bear.<sup>12</sup> *Iwàpèlé* describes the concept of good character. From Ifá:

“All good things of life that a man has  
If he lacks good character,  
They belong to someone else.  
*ìwà, ìwà*, is what we are searching for.”

and:

“Good character is the essence of religion.”<sup>13</sup>

Honesty and patience are among the attributes of good character that are explicitly explained within the texts of Ifá. Fagbemi John Turpin (who was initiated in Nigeria as an Ifá priest), in his lecture “Ifa: The Wellspring of Orisha,” at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, spoke about the wisdom contained in the texts of Ifá: Be truthful, and be righteous. From the scripture of Ifá: “Those who speak the truth are the ones to whom the gods direct help.” Honesty describes energy as well as behavior. The philosophy does not contain principles of absolute evil, original sin, or salvation. Rather, it contains the idea that we are all born as living apostles of divine unity. We are wholly inclusive of the totality. (Be! Become!) We have all come from something. The ancestors, *Egungun*, of a family are celebrated at least once annually. *Egun* is the sacred term for the pure, rarefied spirit form of the ancestors, who are not limited to one's own grandparents and other progenitors. Each of us is a blessed expression of a divine continuum. Turpin also said that the great traditions speak one voice, ultimately. He mentioned some, such as early Egyptian, Bonpo (pre-Buddhist Tibetan), and Hebraic, that shared some beliefs contained in Ifá: immortality of the soul, respect for elders, healing from nature, and the use of tonal values to effect transference. Finally, I think it important to note that speaking as a priest of Ifá, Fagbemi John Turpin said that women are the underpinning of everything that has been accomplished in Africa.

Another idea from Ifá that permeates both Yoruba and Santería culture is the belief that there was an ancient covenant between humans and nature. We have seen that the orishas inhabit many aspects of nature, and the mutual respect implied by the covenant between humans and nature includes all “non-living” things as well. “The Yoruba believe that each object of nature has an ancient name that is used to communi-

cate with it and to command it to do our will. The Yoruba base their use of spells, chants, and incantations against any human or nonhuman creature on this belief.”<sup>14</sup>

## The Orishas

The orishas symbolically represent aspects of the personality of the Divine, Olodumare. They are messengers who reshape spirit into matter, and the embodiment of spiritual principles. Some of the orishas are human ancestors who became deities when they died. They are finite expressions of fundamental characteristics of existence.

One may see candles with a representation of the Seven African Powers, or *Las Siete Potencias Africanas*. These seven are the orishas Eleguá, Ogún, Orunmila (Ifá), Changó, Ochún, Yemayá, Obatalá, and Olofi, who is syncretized as Christ. The spellings of their names may vary. The variations in details of names and attributes of the orishas originates in slavery, and in the syncretization process. In addition, the geographical spread of Yoruba tradition in Africa has caused some variations. The program for a performance of John Santos and the Machete Ensemble includes some of the lyrics that come from chants to the orishas, and some of them are translated. They explain: “It should be understood that since the colonial period, the Yoruba language has undergone an intense transculturalization and creolization in the Caribbean. For this reason, the lyrics are often compilations from many different sources, and are usually difficult to translate literally.”

Each orisha has a number, symbol, color, and day of the week, that is sacred to it, as well as foods and offerings they prefer. Through a complex divination procedure by a babalawo, those who are initiated to Santería find out for certain which orisha owns their head, and must then avoid the foods and behaviors that disagree with their orisha. An uninitiated devotee, *aleyo*, may find out from a santero who owns his or her head, but not with the certainty that a babalawo can provide.

In *The Santería Experience*, by Migene González-Wippler, the author recalls what María, her childhood teacher in Puerto Rico, told her: “If you know the orishas, you know everything. The earth teach you everything, but you must pay your respects to her always, do *foribale*, so she will give you all her secrets. And always remember, the secrets of the earth are the secrets of the orishas.”<sup>15</sup>

Eleguá, Eshù-Elégba, Ellegua

He is the owner of the crossroads, thresholds and opportunities, the trickster who teaches lessons. He wears a cap that is red on one side and black on the other, teaching that unless you go 360° around, you have no right to generalize.<sup>16</sup> He opens and closes all doors and paths. He is the divine messenger who carries prayers to all the orishas, or doesn't, if one does not show proper respect. He is the first orisha invoked in a ceremony, and the first share of all offerings go to Elegua so that he will open up the path, and make things go smoothly. His sacred number is 3, his sacred day is Monday, his colors are red and black and his emblem is a hooked staff. He is partial to cigars, corn and rum and enjoys gifts of these as well as of candles, toys and candies. These last two satisfy his childlike, playful qualities. He personifies the unpredictable element of life. He was certainly present when we stood under the BART sign to sing songs to the orishas, (most especially to Oyá, the orisha who rules the passageways between life and death and who leads the dead, *los Muertos*, to the cemetery) during the *Día de los Muertos* celebration in San Francisco's Mission District.

Here is a *rezo*, or prayer, to Eleguá, sung with or without drums:

*Barasuayo omo ni Alaguana mama kenya irawo e*

*Barasuayo omo ni Alaguana mama kenya irawo e*

*O bara wayo, eke, Echu odara*

*Omo oni Alaguana mama kenya irawo e*

Vital force that through length and breadth appears, child who separates fissures and divides our pathway, do not cut the flow of kindness from me.<sup>17</sup>



Two more prayers:

*Ibarago moyuba*

*Ibarago moyuba*

*Ibarago moyuba Elegba Eshulona*

O great one, I salute you  
O great one, I salute you  
O great one, I salute Eleggua, Eshu on the road



*Ago ago*  
*Ago ago*  
*Ago ile ago*

Open up, open up  
Open up, open up  
Open up, *ile*, open up<sup>18</sup>



## Ogún

Ogún, like Eleguá, is a warrior, and the god of war and iron. One source says his number is 3 or 4, while another says it is 7. His colors are green and black, or indigo. Animals sacred to Ogún include roosters, goats, and dogs. Machetes and all iron symbolize his strength, and are also sacred to him. He likes to eat roots, nuts, meat and berries. Ogun has a reputation for being violent and ill-tempered, but this is not the whole story. He can be called upon for strength and support, durability and perserverance. Traditionally, he is the patron of all working people, and especially blacksmiths and others who work with iron and steel. In modern times, he is the patron of sports, policemen, and truck and bus drivers.

## Ochosi

Ochosi lives with Ogún, in the deep woods, and is also a warrior whom one can turn to for protection. He is the patron of hunters and scouts. He rules deep, penetrating vision, accuracy, and specificity.

His symbol is bow and arrows, and his colors are forest green or turquoise, lavender and black, or blue and orange. His number is 7, and his foods are doves, rum, and guinea hens. In modern times, he is the ruler of law, courts, and social institutions.

### **Yemayá, Yemoja**

Yemayá, great Mother goddess, large-breasted mother of many orishas, is the orisha of maternal love, abundance, the seas and oceans. She is the daughter of the very powerful Olokun, orisha of the deep ocean and producer of hurricanes and tidal waves.

According to one tale, Yemayá gave birth to a vicious son who tried to rape her. She fled until she collapsed, exhausted, at which point her breasts poured out the waters of the two lagoons which became the Niger and Ogun Rivers. Many orishas emerged from her then, including Ogún, Oya, Oshun, and Changó.

Her colors are blue, white and crystal-transparency, and her emblem is a fan shell. Ducks, turtles and goats, or cornmeal, molasses and watermelon are her foods. River stones, silver and pewter are sacred to her as well. She loves perfumes, and like the mermaid, combs and mirrors. In some places, women consider February 2nd an auspicious day to ask Yemaya for a husband. She is affectionate, nurturing, large and attractive. Because I am especially fond of Yemayá, I am making my first chekeré, a beaded gourd for making music, for her. It will have beads in different shades of blue, with white and transparent beads forming a wave pattern in the sea of blue.

### **Ochún, Oshun**

Ochún is the beautiful orisha of sweet water, love, sex, art, culture, and beauty. She is the patron goddess of Cuba, and the Oshun River in Africa is sacred to her. Her colors are yellow, gold, and amber, and her metal is brass. She is fond of honey, French pastries, cinnamon, oranges, pumpkins, perfume, and yellow flowers. Her emblem is a fan, or a peacock feather, and her number is 5. In a well-known *pataki*, or story about the orishas, Ogún was living in the woods and did not want to come out, or be seen by anyone. Without Ogún's iron and forge, there was no progress, no evolution. Eleguá tried to get Ogún to come out, but to no avail. All the other orishas tried then, but Ogún refused to leave the woods. Finally, Ochún filled a gourd with honey, and went to convince Ogún to be sociable, with five silk handkerchiefs tied around her waist.

She danced voluptuously and sang a beautiful love melody. She waved her handkerchiefs in the air, and jingled her five gold bracelets. When Ogún peered around the bush where he had been hiding, she quickly put her hand in her honey pot and spread honey over Ogún's mouth. In this way, dancing and anointing his lips with honey, she gradually lured the love-struck Ogún back to civilization.

### **Oya, Oya Yansá**

Oya, goddess of the river Niger, is the orisha of the wind, the whirlwind and sudden death. She is the owner of the dead, and of cemeteries, which is why we sang to her especially while celebrating the *Día de los Muertos*. Her colors are purple and orange, or maroon, her day is Wednesday, and her number is 9. Copper, red wine, eggplant, plums, and grapes are sacred to Oya, and her emblem is a pair of uplifted buffalo horns. Crossed swords and a black whip may be found in her shrines. She was a warrior queen in life, and married to Changó. When he died, she went after him, and became an orisha also. Changó owns lightning, and Oya is the wind in Changó's thunder and lightning.

### **Changó, Shangó, Xango**

Changó is the god of lightning and thunder, and owner of the *batá* drums, music, and dance. He was originally the fourth king of the Yorubas. He rules economy, politics, and fire. He is aggressive and acrobatic, and uses violence as a moral agency, a law unto himself. His colors are red and white, his day is Friday, and his number is 6. His emblem is a double-headed ax, and he carries thunder stones, and a thunder rattle. Crocodiles, dogs, calabashes and wood are sacred to Changó. His food includes apples, yams, corn, peppers, roosters, sheep, goats, pigs and bulls.

### **Osàìn, Osanyin**

Deity of medicines and healing, Osàìn rules herbs, and the plants of the forest. His number is 3, and his color is green. He feeds on rodents, and can be recognized by leaf and forest emblems, as well as by the bird-topped, wrought-iron staff he carries. Osàìn is one of the lesser known orishas in the United States.

### **Obatálá, Oshala**

Obatálá rules creativity, purity, and honesty, and has many aspects, or “roads,” both male and female. He is also called the King of the white cloth. He is the justice giver and maker, the Father who is everywhere. He exhibits extraordinary calmness, clarity of thought, purity of soul and peaceful character. He is the owner of all heads, including the heads of the orishas. For this reason, one often finds his representations placed, out of respect, above all others in an altar (throne) to the orishas. Obatála represents the concept of knowing, using our brains to think, the intellect, ideas, and the process of knowing and understanding. The egg and the python are sacred tools of Obatála. White beads, cloth and metal are sacred to Obatála.<sup>19</sup>

### **Bembe, or toque de santo, or tambor**

A ceremony in which the santeros make their musical prayers to the orishas is called a *bembe*, or *toque de santo*, or *tambor*. It is like a special party dedicated to an orisha, where the *batá* drums are played in that orisha’s honor.<sup>20</sup>

There are three main parts to a *bembe*: the *orú del igbodú*; the *orú cantado*, (sung oration); and the *güemilere*, or party. There is also a distinct closure to the ceremony. There are sometimes small variations or additions to this format, such as when an initiate, *yawó*, is presented to the drums before the *güemilere* begins.

The word *igbodú*, as in the *oru del igbodú*, refers to the place in ancient Yorubaland where the priests received the oracle of Ifá. Also, in Cuba and wherever Santería is practiced, *igbodú* refers to the room or area where the ceremony takes place, and which also houses the altar, (throne), for the orishas. During this first part of the *bembe*, also known as the *oru seco*, the *batá* drummers play for the throne, the “seat” of the orishas. The throne, or altar, is where the orisha resides in a public setting. It can be simple or an elaborate construction. Some of them become very complex works of art. One style of thrones includes a cloth canopy against a wall or corner, with bunting for the roof and on the front. The dominant color scheme will reflect which orisha is being honored. A vessel for the secrets of the orisha will be part of the throne. “Two potent metaphors...are the Yoruba sense of an altar as the ‘face of the gods,’ and the Kongo concept of an altar as a ‘crossroads’ or border between the worlds. ...The vernacular term altar in Yoruba and Ibo and many West African languages is ‘face of the gods.’ You can’t pray unless you know where the face of the god is. The face is the altar, and it is important to align your face with that face.”<sup>21</sup>

The rhythms, or *toques*, of the *igbodú* are completely instrumental, and highly structured. “The purpose of the *toques* is to musically salute all of the orishas at the opening of the ceremony. There are 22 to 24 primary *toques*, each one signifying a specific orisha and performed in a set order or pattern. ...Each ‘musical prayer’ is really a sonic representation of that particular orisha.”<sup>22</sup> The *batá* drums “speak tongue” in that the notes are like syllables of the *Lucumí* language, a derivation of Yoruba, a tonal African language. (In Cuba, Yoruba speakers became known by the collective term *Lucumí*, after a Yoruba phrase, *oloku mi*, meaning “my friend.”)<sup>23</sup> The drummers use this language to call to the orishas to descend. As told by Fernando Ortiz, an eminent Afro-Cuban ethnomusicologist, “... they must ‘talk a mysterious language’, because the orishas descend to their conjuration, enter human bodies and talk through them...”<sup>24</sup> The *batá* drums, also known in Cuba as *Ilu Aña*, are a set of three, two-headed drums shaped somewhat like an hourglass. The two heads on each drum are of different sizes, thus enabling the *batá* to “speak” with six distinct voices. They are played seated on the lap in a horizontal position. The largest of the set is called the *Iyá*, “mother” in Yoruban. The middle drum is *Itótole*, and the smallest one is called *Okónkolo*, or *omele*. This last provides a stable, metronomic rhythm which anchors the time. The second, middle-pitched drum “responds” to the calls of the largest, lowest pitched drum, which leads the ensemble and initiates all the “conversations.”<sup>25</sup>

Sometimes, at the close of the *oru seco*, a meal is laid out in another room especially for the *batá* drummers. They will eat, and then return to the *igbodú* to continue the ceremony.

The second part of the *bembe* is called the *orú cantado*, or sung oration. During the *orú cantado*, songs are sung to honor the orishas. There is no dancing yet. Certain songs, especially the ones called *pua*, meaning “jab”, may not be sung during this time. These *pua* are used to goad the orishas into coming down to earth. The time for that is later, during the *güemilere*. There are hundreds of songs to the orishas. Most of them are for the most popular or well-known orishas. Seven of them are included in the compact disc recording “*Ilu Aña: Sacred Rhythms*”—Ellegua, Oyá, Ogún, Yemayá, Obatalá, Ochún, and Changó. The text of the songs relate the *patakines*, which are the parables that tell of the deeds and adventures of each orisha. Through these stories, the ancient wisdom of Yoruba philosophy is transmitted, giving people a personalized knowledge of the orishas and a context for their attributes and powers.<sup>26</sup>

The songs are sung in the classically African antiphonal, or call and response, format. There is a lead singer and a chorus, called *ankorí*, or *coro*. The lead singer, or *akpwón*, is in charge of the ceremony, and is

responsible for introducing the songs in the proper order. This traditional order is fairly structured, but it is becoming more liberalized every year, according to one santera. One order of songs to the orishas goes like this:

Eleguá •  
Ogún •                      • *the warriors of the orishas*  
Ochosi •  
Inle  
Babalu-Aye  
Osain  
Orisha-Okò  
Dada  
Oggue  
Ibeyi  
Agayu  
Changó  
*Obatalá*  
Odua  
Obba  
Yeggua  
Oya •  
Yemayá  
Ochún  
Orunmila  
Elegua and Olokun

Olokun shares the closing position with Elegua, the opener and closer of the ways, because she is extremely powerful. She never shows her face, and is danced in a mask. According to one informant, the santeros have lost the knowledge of some of the rites associated with her, and perhaps this is also why she

shares this place of honor with Eleguá. On the recording mentioned above, songs to Changó closed the *orú cantado* because the recording was dedicated to him, the owner of the *batá* drums. Likewise, in ceremonies dedicated to a particular orisha, the *akpwón* will put the songs for the orisha who is being honored at the end, after the songs to Orunmila.

Within this order, a series of songs are sung to each orisha. This group of songs is called a *tratao*, or treatment. The songs will vary according to the *akpwón's* spontaneous choices, and the *batá* drummers need to follow with the appropriate rhythm, as the *akpwón* switches to the next song. The first song in the *tratao* should be a *rezo*, or prayer. The phrasing of a *rezo* is fluid, and floats above the rhythm of the drums, with longer phrases than in the songs that follow. The songs become progressively faster, and with shorter phrases, resulting in a heightening of energy.

The *akpwón* also makes sure that all the santeros participate in the ceremony. Sometimes, if there are any santeros present who are not participating by singing, and dancing, when appropriate, the *akpwón* will stop the drumming and the singing to admonish them. He or she reminds them of their responsibility as santeros to be fully present at the religious ceremonies they attend.

The third part of the ceremony, when the dancing begins, is the *güemilere*, the fiesta. The people continue to sing to the orishas, still accompanied by the *batá* drums. The three elements of the musical prayers to the orishas are a unity: the instrumental, the choral and the danced. This is also the time when “negotiations” take place. The *akpwón* has the option to begin songs to the orishas associated with any santeros who enter the room, thus obligating them to come dance in front of the drums. As each orisha’s rhythm is played, children of that orisha dance using the special movements associated with the orisha. Initiates learn by observation how to do the dances.<sup>27</sup> (The santeros are known as “children of” the orisha who owns their head, or *omo-orishas* of that particular saint.) Then they must “make derecho,” a term meaning to make a monetary offering, usually of a specific token amount like \$1.05. People who have not “made santo,” meaning those who have not been initiated to a particular orisha’s mysteries, may not dance in front of *batá* drums that have been consecrated.

When the *güemilere* is well under way, an orisha may choose to manifest itself by possessing a santero. This is sometimes referred to as being “mounted” by the orisha, and santeros thus mounted are termed “horses.” This somewhat sexual phrasing also applies to the related phenomenon of Vodun ritual possession.

More than one orisha may choose a mount during a bembe. In the old days, any santero present may have danced the orishas to become possessed. Now, however, especially in light of the harsh economic situation in Cuba, a santero who “has aché” will often be paid to invite possession by dancing at a bembe. To “have aché” means that they must receive, through a ceremony called aché, the power to speak for the orishas during a possession state. Aché means “the Word,” and “the Power,” the same aché described earlier as the spiritual power surrounding and permeating everything in the universe as conceived in the Yoruba cosmology of the Ifá texts.

One must not touch an *omo-orisha* while he or she is in the midst of being mounted, for the energies may become dispersed and the possession may not be completed. This will cause the person to feel sick for some days afterward.<sup>28</sup>

During the orisha’s manifestation, he or she will touch or speak to particular persons, or will address everyone at once, giving advice, or blessings, making admonitions, or demanding sacrifices. Some orishas will want to be fed when they come down, causing the santero to drink the blood of a sacrificial animal. “Horses” do not remember what happens while they are mounted. Sweat is used as a cleansing element, sometimes given in an embrace by the orisha inhabiting the santero’s body. Healing may take place during this time, either directly by the orisha, or through the advice given by the orisha and later applied.

To close the *güemilere*, the host of the event will bring out a bucket of water that has been sitting in the room, thus signaling the close of the bembe. Then he or she will toss the water out the front door to get rid of any negativity that may have collected. After this, the drums close by playing a short rhythm that signals the end. People will have made offerings of food to the orishas by placing them at the altar. At this point, the food, (imbued with greater aché), is divided amongst the people present. In this period of scarcity in Cuba, this food is what draws some people to come to bembes, and to stay until the end.

### **Toque de guiro**

Another setting in which people sing songs and make prayers to the orishas does not usually include the *batá* drums, and is not necessarily held in a specially designated room. Instead, the people play chekeres, congas, and the iron bell to accompany the songs. When my friends and I sang under the BART sign at 24th and Mission on the evening of the Día de los Muertos, or when we sing orisha songs in the “rumba

room” at a party, we are participating in a *toque de guiro*. However, when I checked on the use of this term with one of the *batá* drummers at a most recent rumba party, he looked puzzled at the usage of the term for the occasion, and told me that *guiros* are the beaded gourds. In the program to the Machete Ensemble performance, *guiro* is described as the name for this style of music, which comes from the beaded gourd called *guiros*, or chekeres.

## Conclusion

There seems to be a continuum of religious contexts in which these prayers are offered to the orishas. I am not sure about the “orthodox” viewpoint (if there is such a thing) about the sacredness of the songs one might sing to Yemayá while walking on the beach, or to Oshún when visiting a spring, but I think these less formalized settings are still considered offerings to the orishas, who appreciate the *aché* being sent to them by the sincere singer. In fact, as the orishas are embodied in various aspects of nature, these natural settings may be the original *igbodú*. I was introduced to this body of songs to the orishas when I was at the beach with a friend who sang a song to Yemayá. When I expressed interest in learning and uncertainty about the quality of my voice, he informed me that the orishas do not care whether one has a polished voice or exact knowledge of the songs, but rather that the songs are being offered with sincerity and respect. Guillermo Cespedes, talented and knowledgeable maestro of Afro-Cuban rhythm at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, told us that “most of the time, all the people at a *bembe* don’t know all of the songs. You need to learn to sing the songs by doing it— reading lips, imitating sounds, making the effort.” He is the *akpwón* in our classes, and does indeed remind us that we need to be fully present, with no spacing out or socializing during class, which could also be considered a *guiro*.

The music is integral to the practice of Santería. For some people, it appears that making the music is the central feature of their spiritual life. To learn the rhythms and the songs requires tremendous dedication, and promises a lifetime of study. It takes at least twenty years for *batá* drummers to reach “university level” in that world of music.<sup>29</sup> The structure of the music is complex and deep, and although some of its features are beginning to be written down, it is still an oral tradition.

I have been told that there are not very many people studying with the elder masters of the music in Cuba, an alarming prospect for the continuation of this joyful tradition. On the other hand, there are many

students of the music in the San Francisco Bay Area, and many resources for learning. The question remains, however, whether the full depth and breadth of the knowledge will be passed on to our generation.

*Los Muñequitos de Matanzas*, a 14-member percussion, song and dance ensemble, are a national treasure of Cuba. They are the oldest folkloric group in Cuba, and they show their tremendous experience in the highly acclaimed brilliance of their performances. In the program notes from the August 1994 performance of *Los Muñequitos* at Zellerbach Auditorium at U.C. Berkeley, Yvonne Daniel, an Associate Professor of Dance and Anthropology at Smith College wrote, “They have literally stored hundreds of chants, rhythms and gestures within their bodies to be shared generation after generation in communal performances.”

In the San Francisco Bay Area, groups like *John Santos and the Machete Ensemble* perform songs to the orishas (chants) in new ways, in arrangements that include gospel song interspersed with verses to a chant. La Peña Cultural Center offered free classes in Afro-Cuban rhythm, taught by Guillermo Cespedes, of the group Conjunto Cespedes. In 1994, the University Art Museum at Berkeley mounted a major exhibit entitled “Art and Alters of Africa and the African Americas”. The exhibit was enriched by numerous lectures, films, and musical celebrations. In Humboldt County, some dedicated students, scholars and teachers of this music and dance have been learning and sharing their knowledge for many years. Annually, Humboldt State University taps this reservoir of expertise, and hosts a week-long intensive course in Afro-Cuban folkloric percussion, song, and dance, which is attended by people from around the world. In addition to the expert teachers from Northern California, Cuban masters of the tradition also teach at the workshop.

This is a rich and living tradition.

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## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Afro-Cuban Altars for the Oricha in Cuba and the U.S.,” (lecture given at the University Art Museum, U.C. Berkeley, November 6, 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> “Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas,” (lecture given at the University of California at Berkeley, October 3, 1994). Thompson curated the major exhibit of the same name at the University Art Museum and is author of *Face of the Gods*, the book-length exhibition catalogue.
- <sup>3</sup> “Ifá: The Wellspring of Orisha” (lecture given at the University Art Museum, U.C. Berkeley, October 9, 1994).
- <sup>4</sup> George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World, The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pg. —?.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid*, pg. 13.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 16.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 9.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas D. Blakely et al., *Religion in Africa*, monograph series of the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University, volume 4, (London: James Curry; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), in the article “Ifá: A West African Cosmological System” by Wándé Abímbólá, p. 104.
- <sup>9</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion, the “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 15.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 102.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 106-8.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 111-12.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 113 and 115
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 114.
- <sup>15</sup> p. 35-6
- <sup>16</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, “Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas,” (lecture given at the University of California at Berkeley, October 3, 1994).
- <sup>17</sup> Rebeca Mauleón, photocopied handout from Afro-Cuban ensemble class, Mills College, fall 1995, from the liner notes by Morton Marks on the CD “Afro-Cuba,” Rounder 1088.
- <sup>18</sup> Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería An African Religion in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), p.94.
- <sup>19</sup> In addition to the information I have absorbed from my studies of the orishas for the last two years, the specific information about their colors, numbers and preferences comes from Murphy, p. 42-3, Teish, p. 114-5 (see bibliography), photocopied handout from the Face of the Gods exhibit at U.C. Berkeley, and “Orisha • Rumba Song Anthology (an anonymous and unpublished book), p. 6-11.
- <sup>20</sup> Migene González-Wippler, *The Santería Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1982), p. 222.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, “Face of the Gods” museum exhibit program guide. University Art Museum, U.C. Berkeley, September 1994 through February 1995.
- <sup>22</sup> Michael Spiro, Scott Wardinsky, Andy Schloss, “Ilu Aña: Sacred Rhythms” (liner notes to CD, Fundamento Productions, 1995).
- <sup>23</sup> Mauleón, class handout, from Marks, “Afro-Cuba”.
- <sup>24</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Los Instrumentos de la Música Afrocubana* (1952) Volume IV, p. 241. As translated by John Turpin III and B.E. Martinez, *BATA The Sacred Drums of the Yoruba in Cuba*. Out of the liner notes by Spiro, “Ilu Aña”.
- <sup>25</sup> Spiro, “Ilu Aña” liner notes.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>27</sup> González-Wippler, *The Santería Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1982).
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p. 133.
- <sup>29</sup> Roberto Borrel, second lecture-demonstration in a three-part series on Cuban Music and Dance, at La Peña Cultural Center, Berkeley, October 13, 1994.