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Afro-Cuban Magical Ritualism of Sexuality in *La navaja de Olofé (Olofé's Razor)* by Matías Montes Huidobro

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Matías Montes Huidobro's artistic creation is influenced by two fundamental factors: his Cuban idiosyncrasy and his condition as an exile. He defines his position as a Cuban writer as follows:

My favorite work is always the last one that I am writing, but, given that fact, perhaps I have a particular preference for *Exilio*, which represents a moment of my fulfillment as a playwright... Besides, it defines me completely as the Cuban writer that I will always be... Cuba comes out in everything I write. I do not define my Cubaness in the terms of Belascoáin and Neptuno, or Galiano and San Rafael. I define my Cubaness in each word that I write. Simply, I am Cuban, regardless of what part of the earth I may find myself or how my writings may be included or excluded. (231-2)

Olofé's Razor, written in 1981 and published in 1982, is an essential part of that Cubaness that Montes Huidobro alludes to and of his condition as a writer since in it we find many of the components that define his theater. The black presence is found in several of his works, but especially in *Olofé's Razor*¹ where the sacred, the mythical and the marvelous of the millenary African traditions are brilliantly connected. The work fits the definition that Lezama Lima refers to in *La expresión americana (The American Expression:)* "...everything will have to be reconstructed, and the old myths, upon reappearing, will offer us new incantations and enigmas with an unrecognizable face. The mythical fictions are new myths, with renewed tedium and terrors" (71).

The birth of this play is found in an early work that Montes Huidobro wrote in the 50's with the title *The masks*, where the relation Man/Woman is presented schematically and the Afro-Cuban element is used as a background. Montes Huidobro reuses the subject of this play in the 80's and creates a new Afro-Cuban one with the symbolic title *Olofé's Razor*. The Afro-Cubanness of this new dramatic piece is unraveled by means of a magic ritualism of the Afro-Cuban elements, metatheatrical technique, scenic space, music, Afro-Cuban songs, verbal distortions and a Freudian touch that contribute to highlighting the erotic desires of the protagonists.

It is worth noting that the beliefs, myths and Yoruba rites that are reworked in *Olofé's Razor* are intimately related to the Rule of Ocha or *Santería*, an Afro-Cuban religious system by which the Yoruba pantheon *orishas* are identified with the Catholic Church's saints. In fact, the play's protagonists show specific traits that correspond to three of the most popular *Santería* orishas: Shangó, Oshún and Yemayá. The womanizer and troublemaker orisha Shangó, who is identified with Saint Bárbara, is the incarnation of manliness and the rhumba dancer par excellence. One of the symbols of this powerful orisha is the royal palm tree whose phallic connotation is obvious. The popular Oshún, the goddess of love and rivers is Shangó's favorite lover. She is identified with the Virgin of El Cobre, patroness of Cuba. She represents the idealization of the beautiful and seductive *mulatta*, whom her pursuers affectionately refer to as Yeyeo or Cachita. And they sing *súyeres*, or *Lucumí* invocational prayers, so that she will descend to perform her ritual activities. One must be afraid of her if she comes down an angry woman, but she can be as sweet as honey if she descends with good cheer. We know that Yemayá represents the archetypical figure of Mother-Earth. She is the incarnation of fertility and has incestuous relations with her son

Oggún, god of iron. Referring to Ochún, Lydia Cabrera says the following: "that was a very strange love ... an odd looking love. Not at all of a mother, but more of a lover" (237). In *Santería*, Yemayá is the brown Virgin of Regla. Montes Huidobro points out in his book *Persona, vida y máscara en el teatro cubano* that there is a close relationship between the liturgy of African origin and the world of the Cuban theater:

Magic comes to us in a very direct way through things ebony, becoming an important essence of the Afro-Cuban black liturgy which had a particular strength in the Cuban culture, as strong as Christian liturgy; even stronger, according to some ... We find ourselves with a strong element of magic, coming directly and devoid of intermediaries, from the African religions that have survived in Cuba and from a rich literary, religious and magical world that can be found in black Yoruba sources ... A world of magic, a theatrical world and a black world, all seem to be synonymous. (41-44)

As far as the play stage setting, Montes Huidobro indicates that:

A great mirror in the middle will centralize the action. It is the narcissistic area of a man, who, as the curtain opens, will be shaving himself with a straight razor. The act of getting dressed will never materialize. It will be an endless process ... The area of the mirror is the man's area where the narcissistic act of adoring himself will take place, as well as the ceremony of the woman's adoration. (38)

The other two areas of the action will be on both sides of the mirror. The area of the action of the woman, when she portrays the character of the mother, will be that of the armchair. When she plays the role of the lover, the action will take place in bed (38).

The premiere of the play took place in 1986 in the Miami Festival, under the direction of Rafael de Acha, who

changed the area of the action. That is to say, the bed now becomes the central focus of the action and can be interpreted as the beginning and end of life itself. Other elements that contribute to the audience's attraction and the choreography is the conga music, the rumba and the playing of the drums that will be heard during the whole staging of the play, whose backroom is the Santiago de Cuba carnival, as well as the use of fire works. As far as the lyrics, the playwright uses the well-known techniques developed by the authors of the *negrista* poetry of the 1930's, that is to say, the anaphora, the alliteration, the *jitanjáfora* and African words. These poetic devices are used to mark the rhythmic pattern of the songs and to emphasize the relationships among the protagonists, as their characters are being delineated in their fight for the power of the razor, a phallic symbol. The first crib song shows the relationship Lover/Son:

Oculé, Mayá, oculé Mayá,
Black negro, where are you?
Oculé, Mayá, oculé Mayá,
Black negro, where are you?
.....
Oculé, Mayá, oculé Mayá,
Black negress, where are you?
Oculé, Mayá, oculé Mayá,
Black negress, where are you? (43)

The second song alludes to the incestuous relationship between the Man/Shangó and the Mother/Yemayá and her aunt:

Sleep, sleep, little Changó
that it is you whom Yemayá loves...
Sleep, sleep, little Changó
That Ochún is asking for you... (39)

Finally, in the third stanza, a version of the second stanza is more explicit about the rowdy incestuous relationship:

Sleep, sleep little Changó
that Yemayá has a little gift for you...
Sleep, beautiful black man
Let my Changocito not wake up. (39)

On the other hand, the use of the anaphora in the following verses underlines the state of frustration of the woman by the rejection of the young man:

You see, I cannot walk,
You see, I can no longer screw,
You see, I am a black Mandiga
You see, I am without a dinga. (40)

The characters' speech shows an African linguistic influence in the vernacular lingo of the island, especially when it deals with the mythical-religious world of *Santería*. This linguistic aspect, however, is difficult to trace due to the unclear African linguistic substratum, lexical inventions and the mystification created by the author.

Olofé's Razor's plot is based on the sexual relationship of a couple, a good looking young man, about twenty years of age, and his lover, a woman of about forty years of age, during the carnival in Santiago de Cuba. The physical aspect of the woman suffers a metamorphosis according to her spacial position on stage: sensual and attractive when she is in bed, or prematurely aged when she sits in the rocking chair. The plot, in its apparent simplicity, gets more complex when the author recreates the Yoruba myth of incest with a Freudian touch of the Oedipus complex. The play's title is open to several interpretations. The razor can be what the man uses to shave himself, the weapon that the woman uses to undertake the symbolic castration or the phallus/object that is identified with the sexual supremacy attributed to Olofé/Olofi, creator of the universe

and to Shangó, the god of dancing, thunder and lightning.

The man's *machismo* is obvious at the very beginning of the play. We see it at first when he shaves himself and contemplates himself repeatedly and for a long time in the mirror. He manages to go on a spree to the carnival and enjoy himself with the sexy *mulattas*. "Santiago is on fire. Changó is on the streets and there's no room to walk. One has to roll over the people! Nobody can stay at home! Today one rejoices immensely. Like never before" (39). The woman tries to stop him from leaving. She rolls over in bed and invites him to fornicate before the old man comes back from the grocery store. The old man could be related to Olofi who lives a life separate from other humans, or to her husband, to whom she is unfaithful. Through magic and the use of theatrical space, Montes Huidobro succeeds in transforming the woman into a tired mother who is worried about her son during this night of merrymaking: "Be careful, son. Don't drink too much tonight and be careful with the razor that has a half-moon. Be careful, son. These young *mulattas* who undress in an instant are on fire, and you can get burned" (41). These words allude to the jealousy of the Mother/Lover towards young *mulattas*. Now the mother longs for the good times in her youth: "How distant those times! Those nights. The evil spirits got to me. Downing lemon drops with 90% proof alcohol. Oh, son, if you only knew your mother back then! I would be one of those *mulattas*" (42). The mother blames Olofé for her physical waste: "But not me, I am not *gand-inga* with okra or a gourd without water" (209). The Mother becomes restless and throws herself to the floor, shouting, "Olofé, Olofé, get me out of the well where you have thrown me!" (40). She, like the goddess Yemayá, Mother-Earth can not be resigned to live shut up in her home. That is to say, she is still sensual and has the charm of an attractive woman and, like the hot *mulattas*, wants to enjoy life. Again in

bed, she transforms herself into the Lover and provokes the Man/Son, reminding him of her lewd encounter with Olofé:

Alas! How beautiful Olofé was when he came from the clouds! Completely naked and not even a loincloth! ...Come Olofé, the mountain told him, as she was broken in two by the valley! Come, Olofé, that I am the earth, Olofé, the earth that has everything! Look at these two peaks, Olofé, tasty little macho, pretty in the mouth! Look at these peaks, and she touched the tips of her breasts! I am the Earth Olofé, Olofé! ... and then Olofé descended because he was hungry. (40)

This scene of highly erotic content alludes to the incestuous Yoruba myth involving Shangó and Yemayá. The mother plays an active role in seducing the son. She, like the goddess Yemayá, wants him to kiss her, touch her, caress and possess her:

Come, touch me Olofé! Olofé it is me! Olofé it is you! Olofé it is the bed!... Olofé has everything and gives everything! He gives and he takes! He loves and he lets himself be loved! He goes up and he comes down! He kisses and he lets himself be kissed! ...! Olofé it is you! Olofé it is me! He flies and he swims! He swims in the water! He swims in the water...! (41)

From Yemayá, the goddess of the sea, the Mother/Water pours forth all life and, thusly the son, possessed by the Lucumi deity, also cries out: "Swim ...in the ... water! ... I am Olofé" (41). The Mother/Lover in her individual fight with the Man/Son, who has abandoned her for the sexy *mulattas*, is the one who now assumes the sexual power of Olofé/Shangó. The scene that evokes the paroxysm of erotic violence in bed, the alfa and omega of life, underlines the final triumph of the Mother/Lover upon carrying out the symbolic castration which ends the play. Now she is the one who has Olofé's razor, that is to say, the supreme power of

the razor-phallus of the divinity that she invokes: "It is mine and you can leave. I am the one who has what Olofé has! I am the earth and the sky! I possess Olofé's sword!" (47).

There is no doubt that in this dazzling and magical play, theatre within theatre, Afro-Cuban music, metaphoric language and theatrical space are devices that the playwright uses with great success in order to re-create, in an Afro-Cuban context, the thorny issue of incest with a Freudian touch of the Oedipus complex. Matías Montes Huidobro's approach to the black theme is spontaneous and an essential aspect of his Cubaness and no matter where he may live, one he is able to feel and draw on for his artistic endeavors. *Olofé's Razor* reinterprets singularly the Yoruba myths thereby creating a new *appataki* with its different interpretations. This brilliant ritualistic play is another example of the ability and artistic genius of one of the most representatives authors of contemporary literature of both shores, Cuba and the Diaspora.

(Translated from the Spanish by Jorge Rodríguez-Florida, Chicago State University)

NOTES

1. All quotes referring to *Olofé's Razor* come from the critical anthology *Presencia negra: teatro cubano de la diáspora* published by Armando González-Pérez in Madrid: Betania, 1999. The black presence can also be found in his novel *Concierto de sordos* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press, 2001) as well as in HIS excellent studies of literary criticism: *Persona, vida y máscara del teatro cubano* (Miami: Universal, 1973); *Teoría y práctica del catedratisimo en Los negros catedráticos de Francisco Fernández* (Honolulu, Hawaii: Editorial Persona, 1987); his article, "Itinerario del Ebó", *Revista Circulo*, 1979, págs. 105-114; his short-story "Ikú", *Revista Hispano-Cubana*, 2001, No. 11, pp149-154; and in his last dramatic play *Orishas' Divination* published in *Teatro Cubano de Miami*. Miami: Editorial Silueta, 2010, 81-119).